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Greggs

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- (54) **VEHICLE FRONT-END ASSEMBLY**
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- (*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 694 days.

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- (21) Appl. No.: **16/118,782**
- (22) Filed: **Aug. 31, 2018**

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- (65) **Prior Publication Data**
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B60D 1/14 (2006.01)
B60D 1/50 (2006.01)
- (52) **U.S. Cl.**
CPC **B60D 1/485** (2013.01); **B60D 1/143** (2013.01); **B60D 1/488** (2013.01); **B60D 1/50** (2013.01)
- (58) **Field of Classification Search**
CPC B60D 1/485; B60D 1/143; B60D 1/488; B60D 1/50
See application file for complete search history.

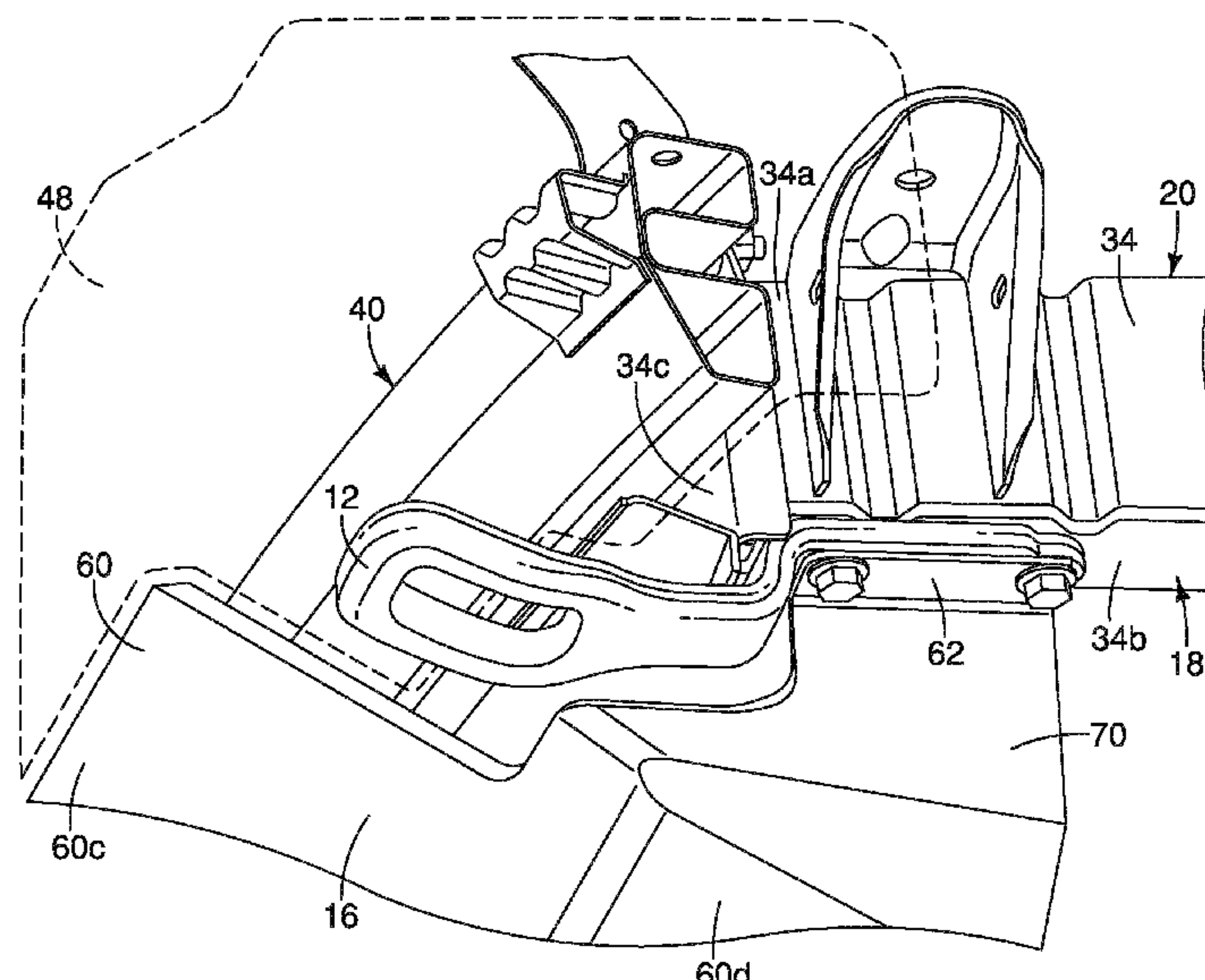
- (57) **ABSTRACT**

A vehicle front-end assembly includes a vehicle frame, a first tow hook and a skid plate. The first tow hook has a forward portion and a rearward portion. The rearward portion of the first tow hook is attached a front-end portion of a first front side member of the vehicle frame by a mechanical fastener. The skid plate has a main section and a first attachment flange that extends from the main section. The first attachment flange is attached to the front-end portion of the first front side member by the mechanical fastener. The first attachment flange has a first alignment projecting surface. During installation of the skid plate to the first front side member, the first alignment projection contacts a surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member.

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20 Claims, 12 Drawing Sheets



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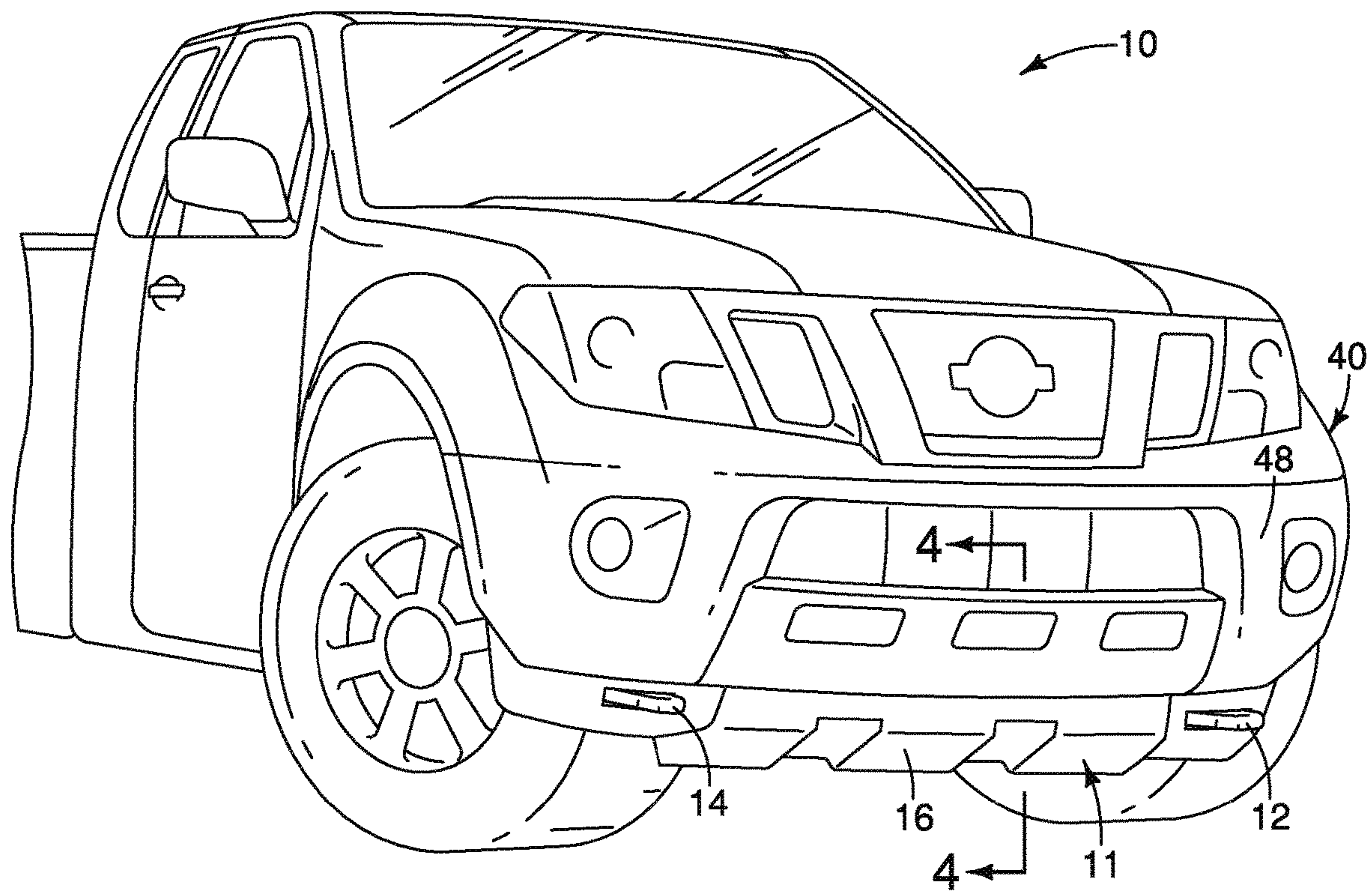


FIG. 1

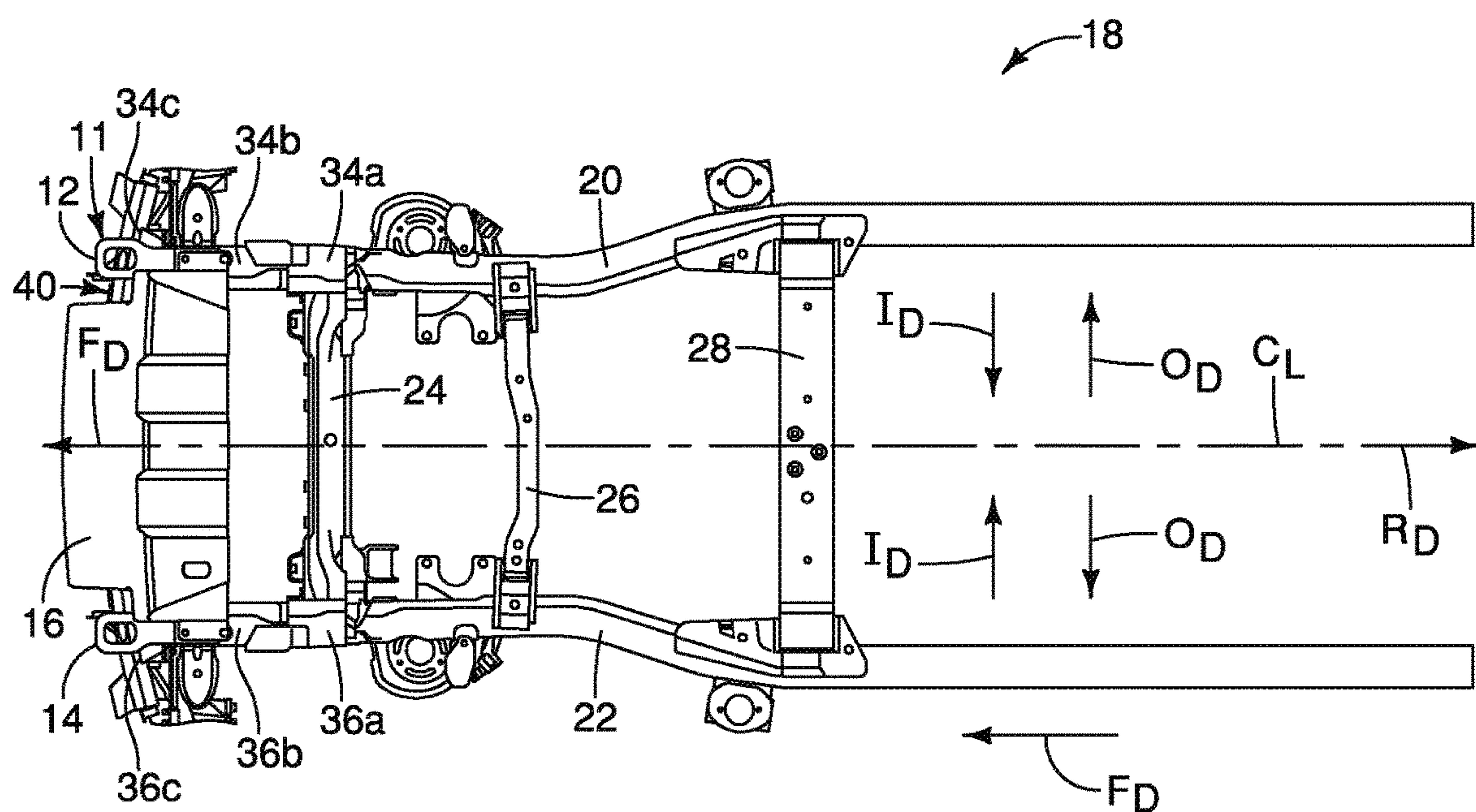


FIG. 2

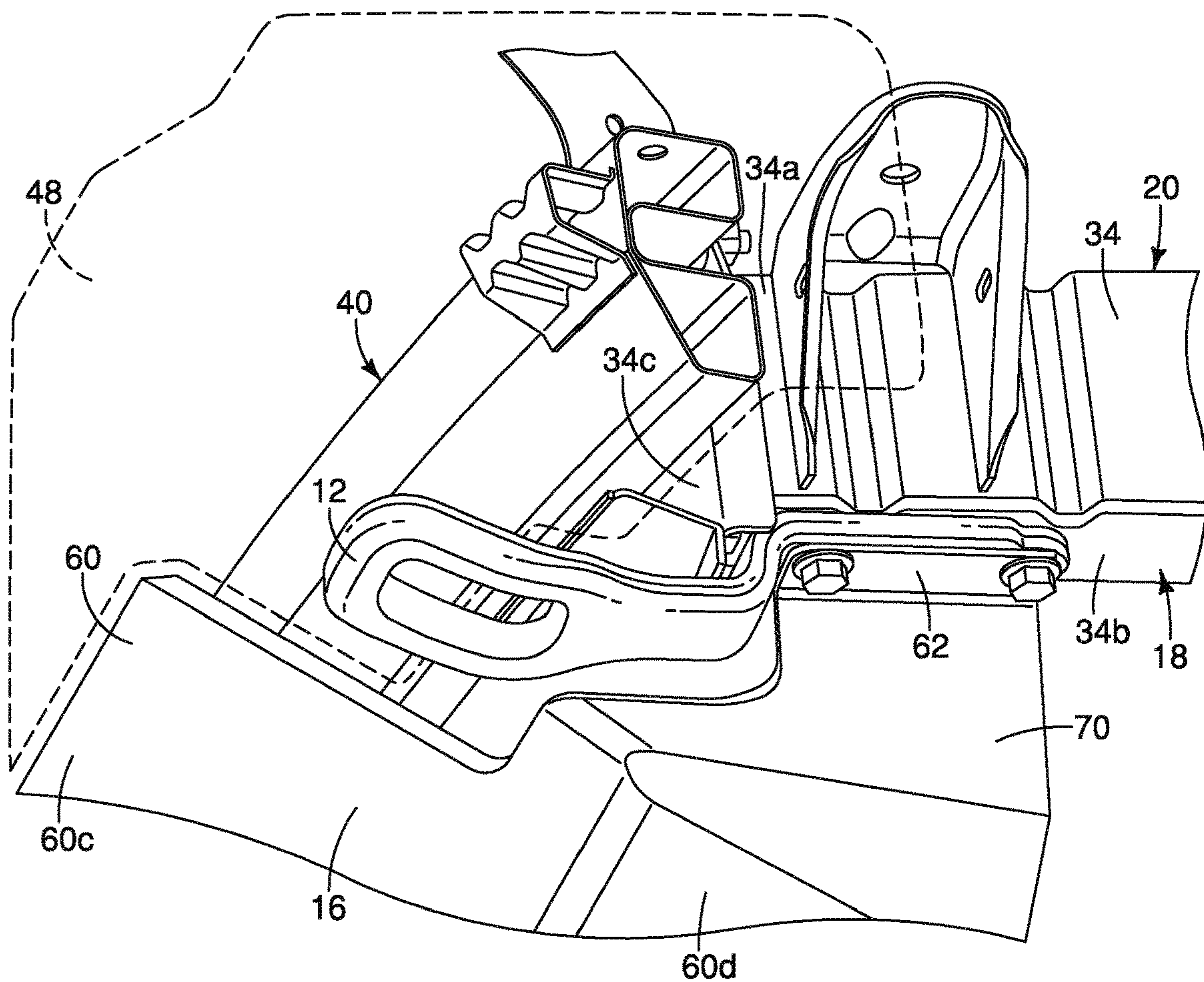


FIG. 3

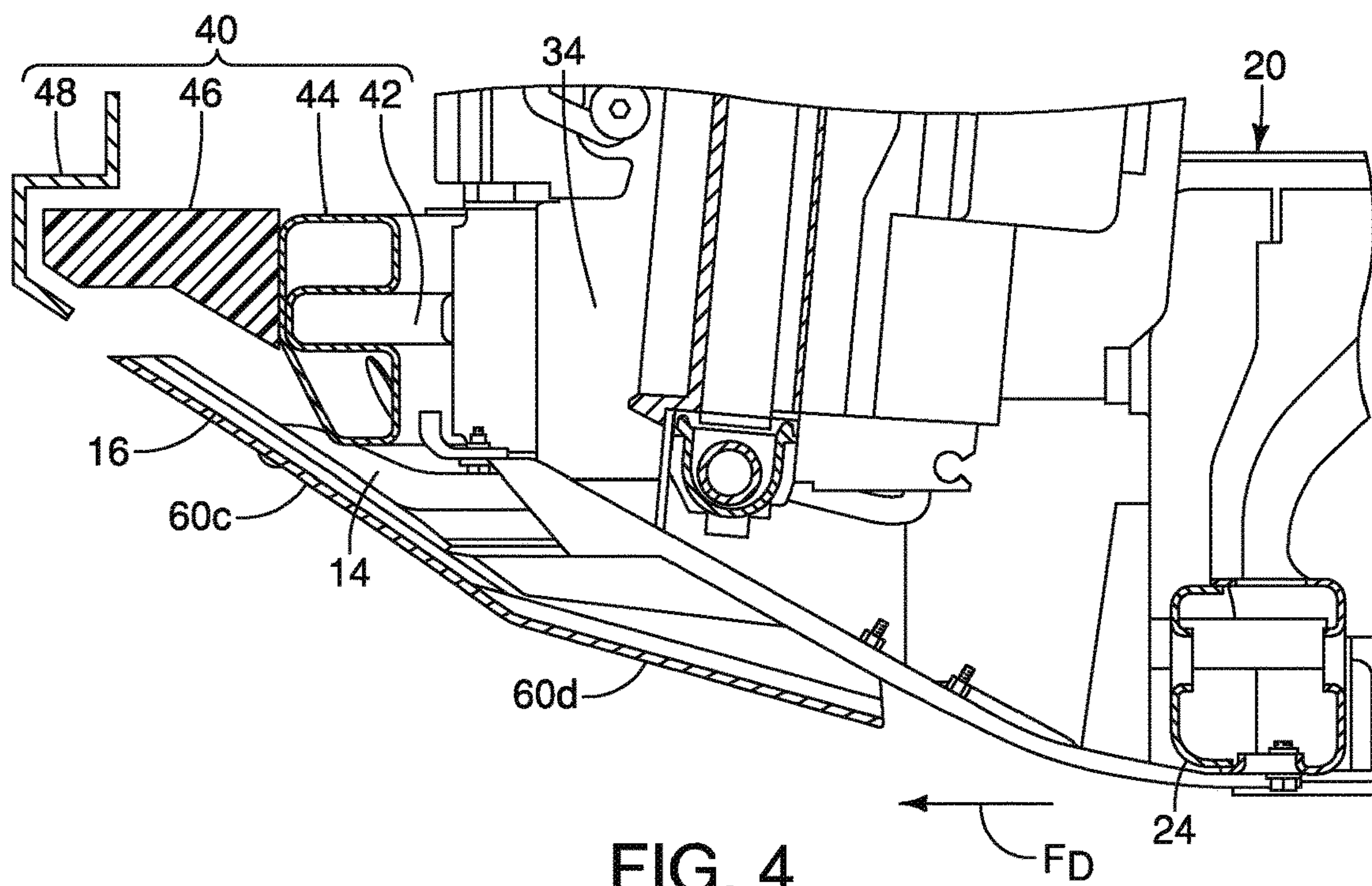


FIG. 4

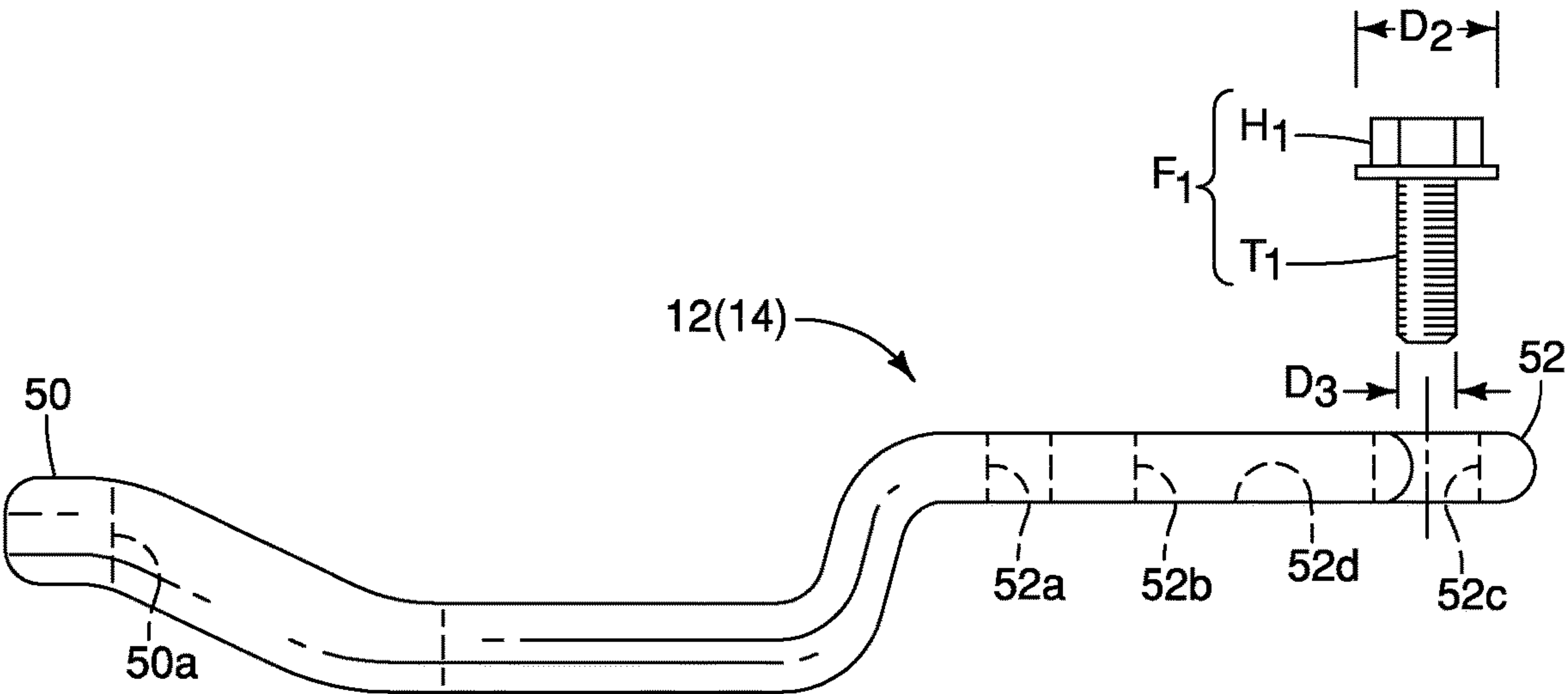


FIG. 5

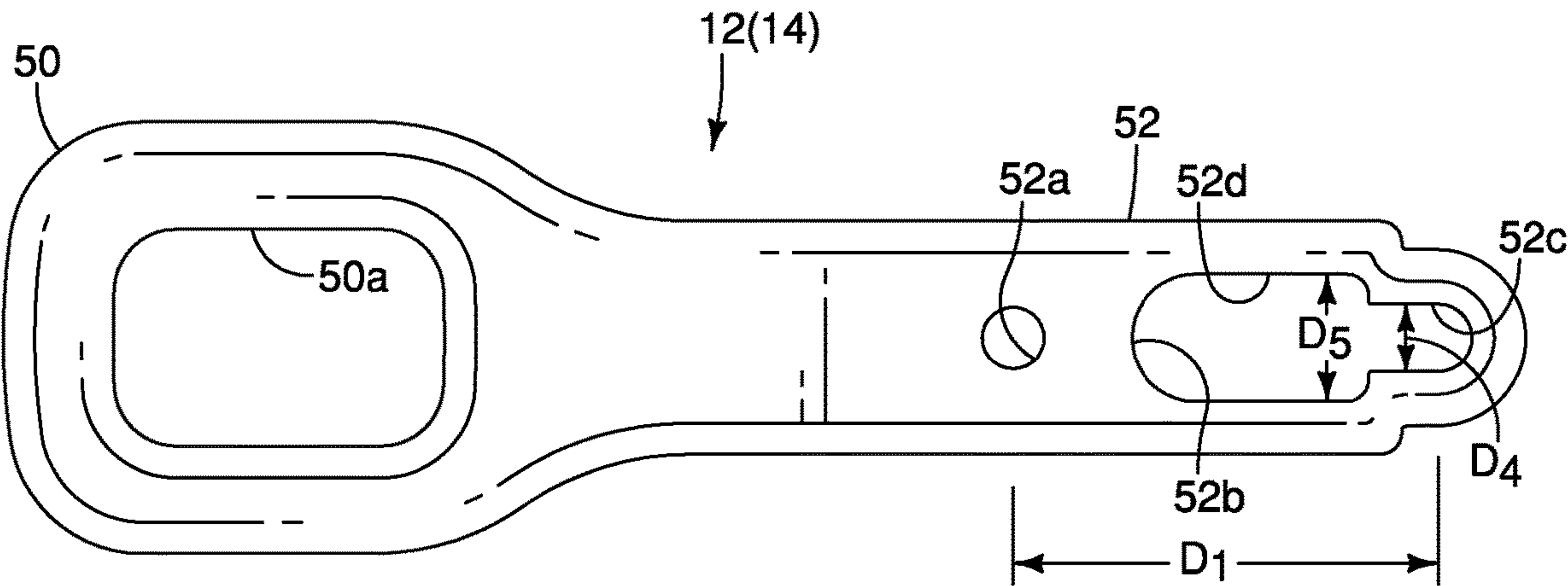


FIG. 6

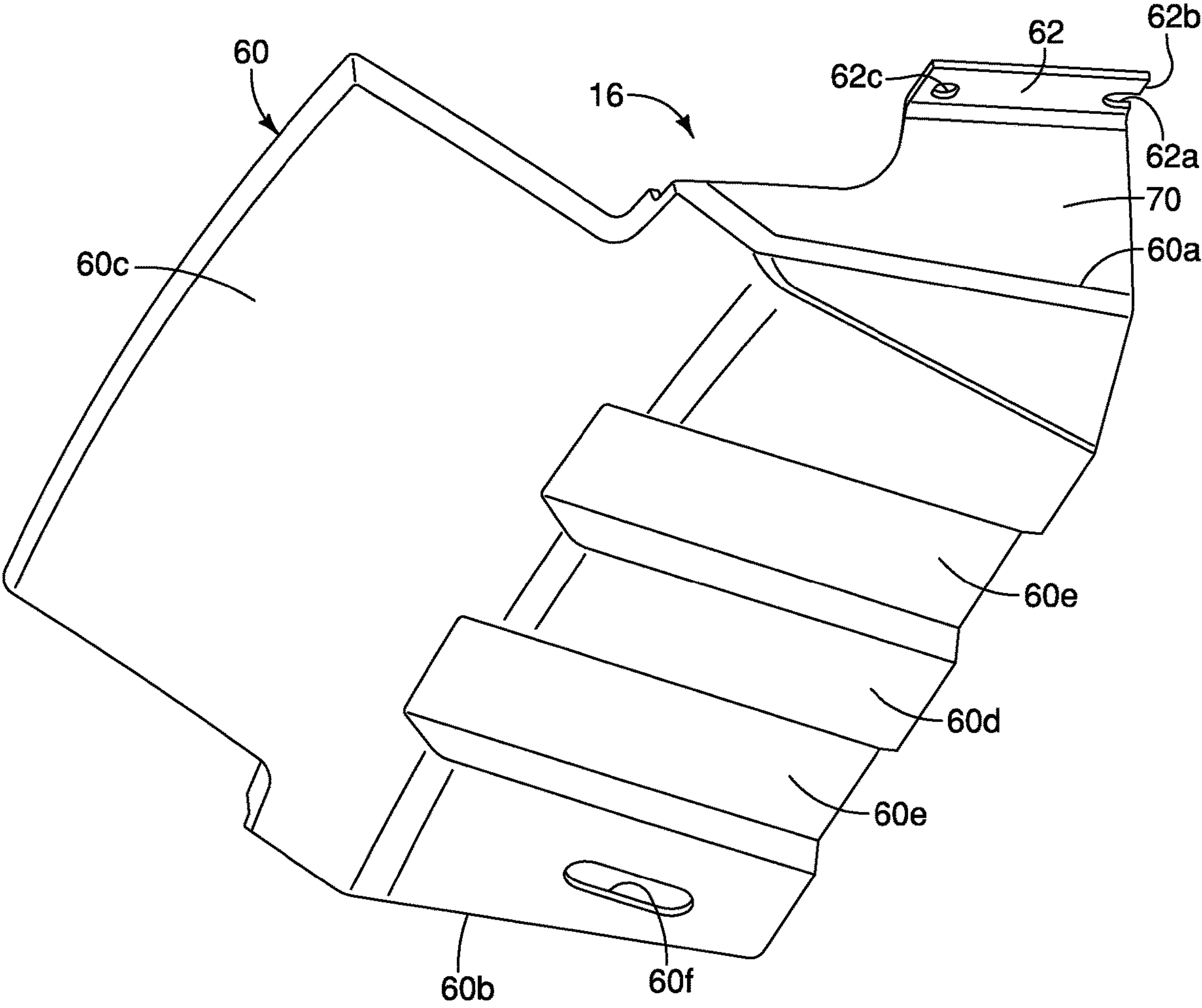
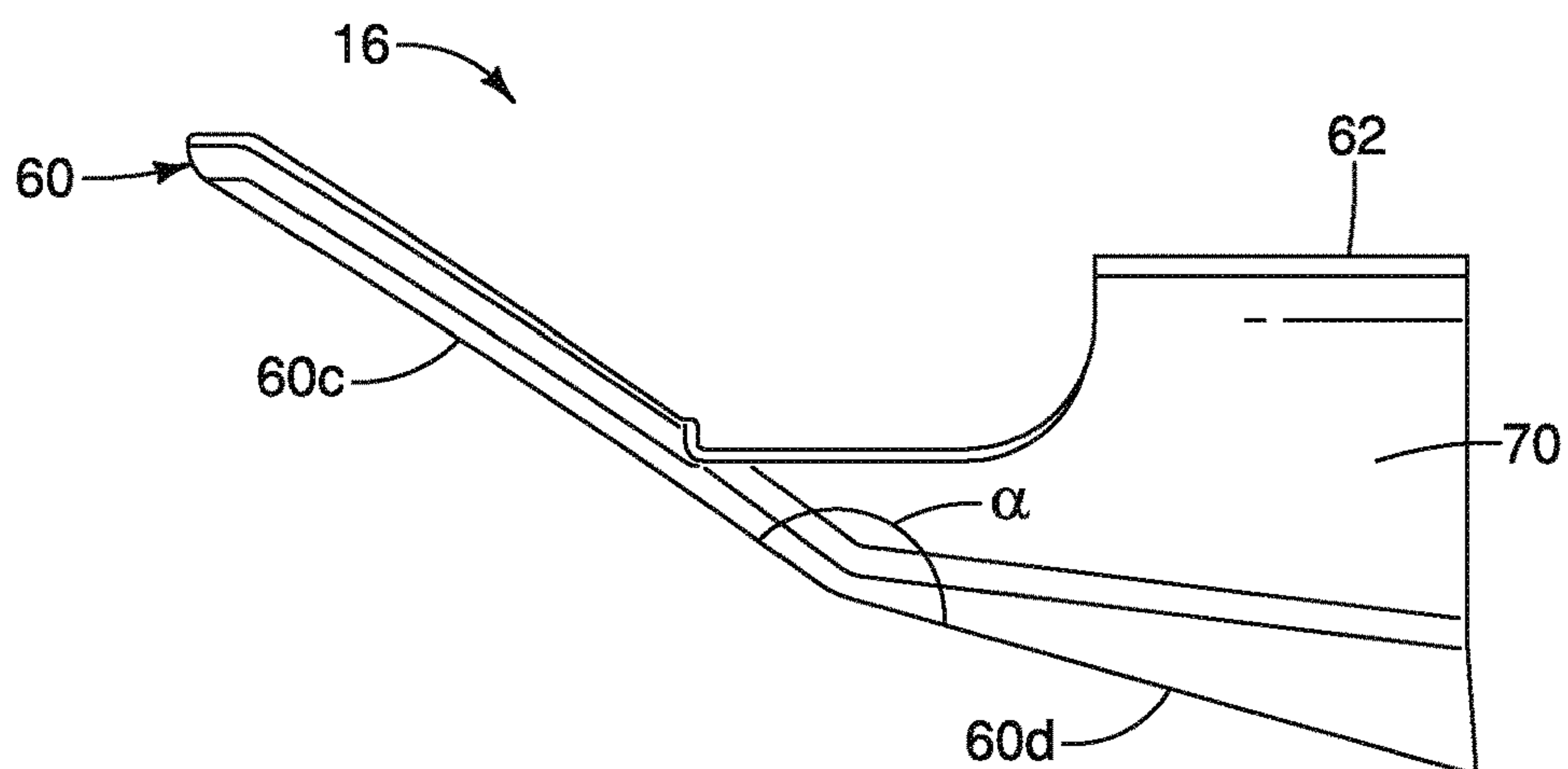
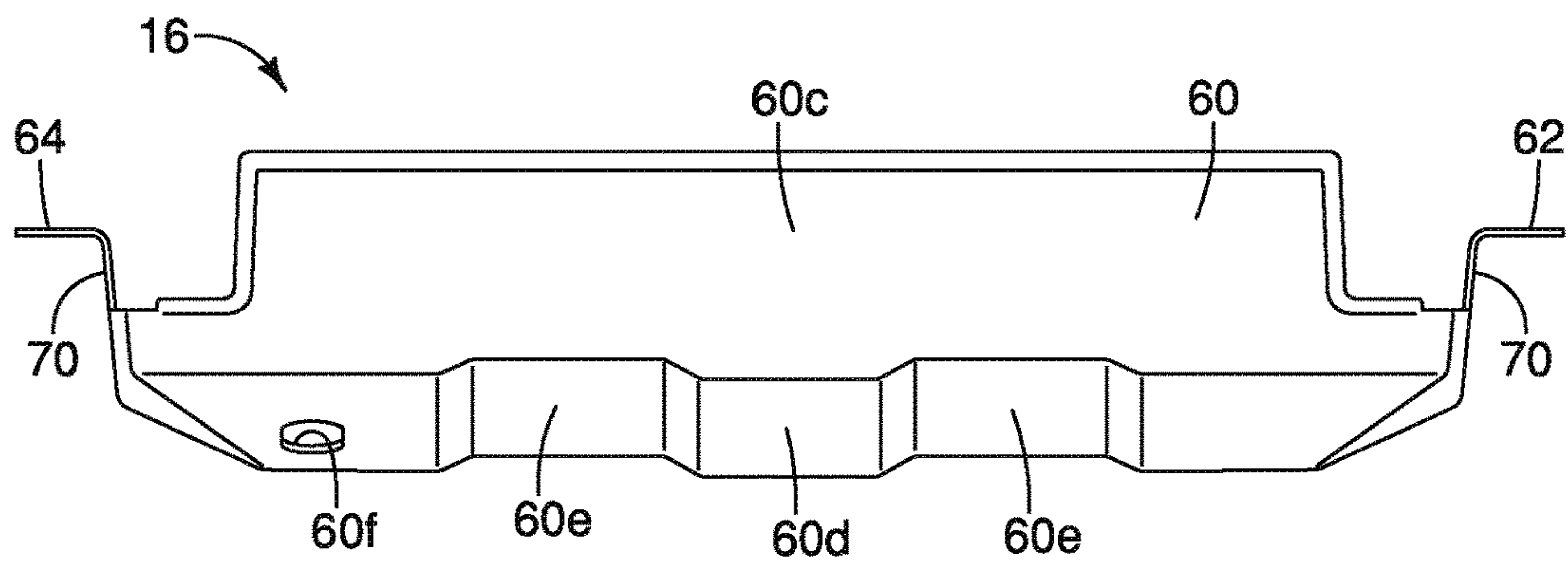
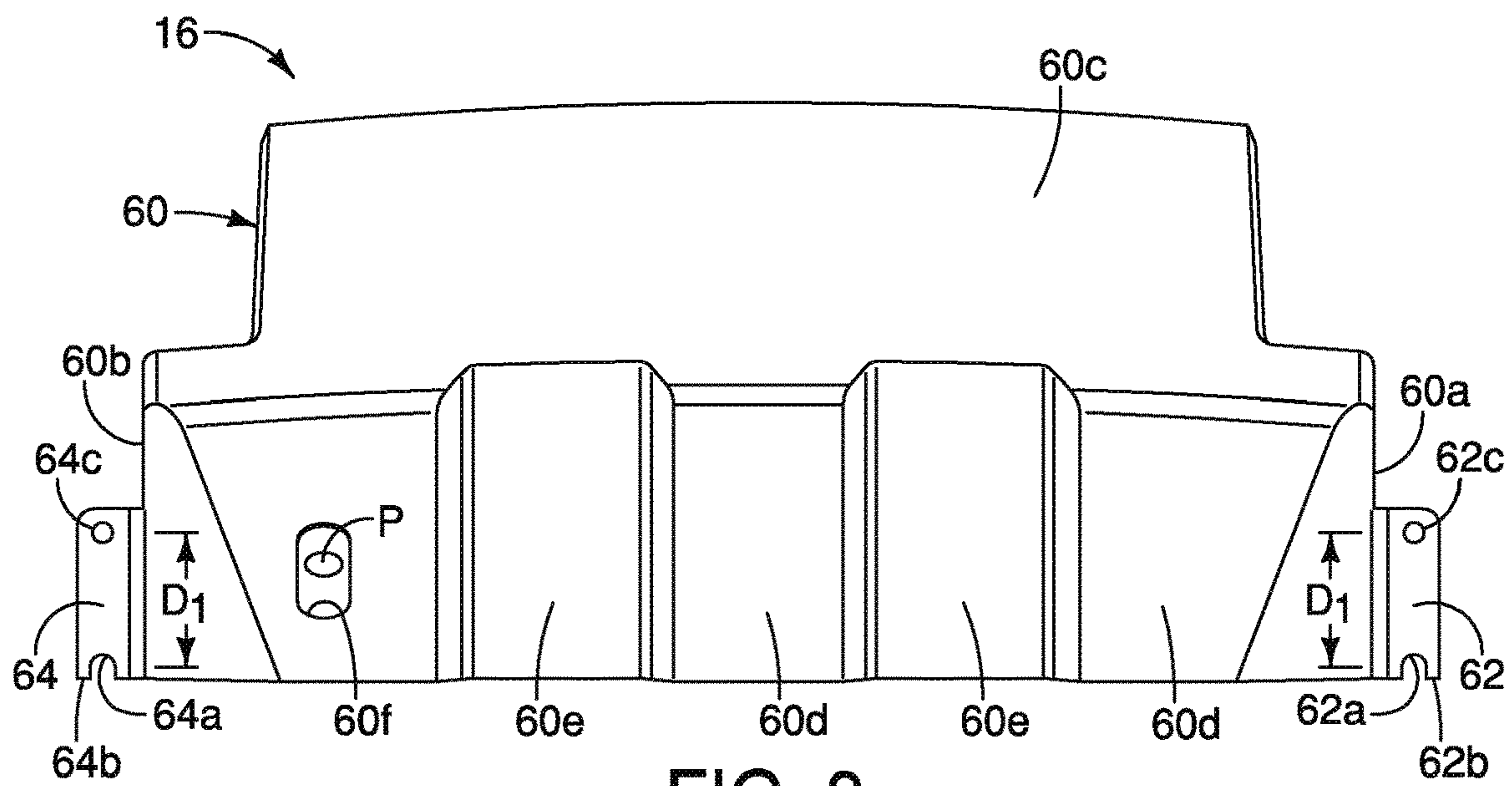


FIG. 7



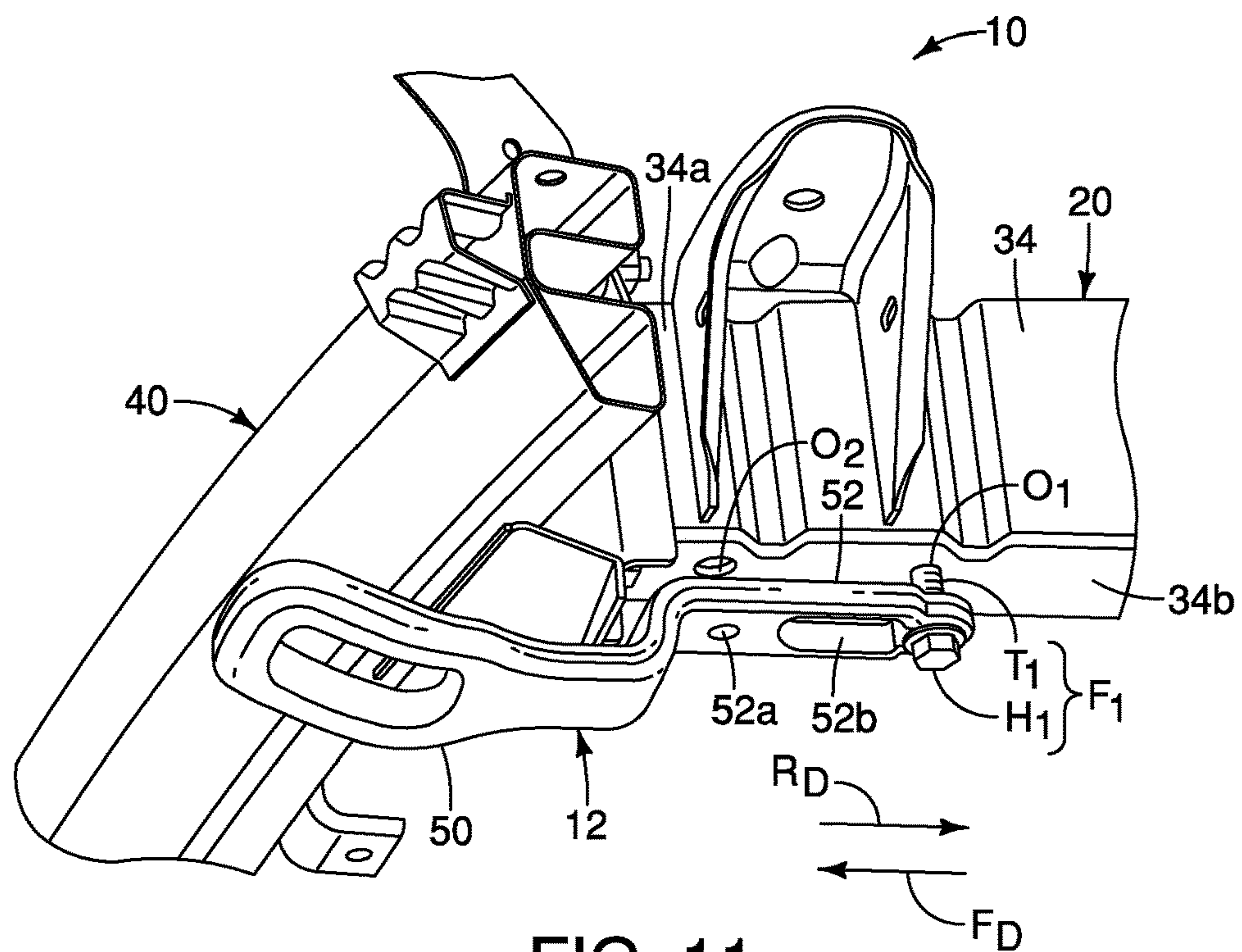


FIG. 11

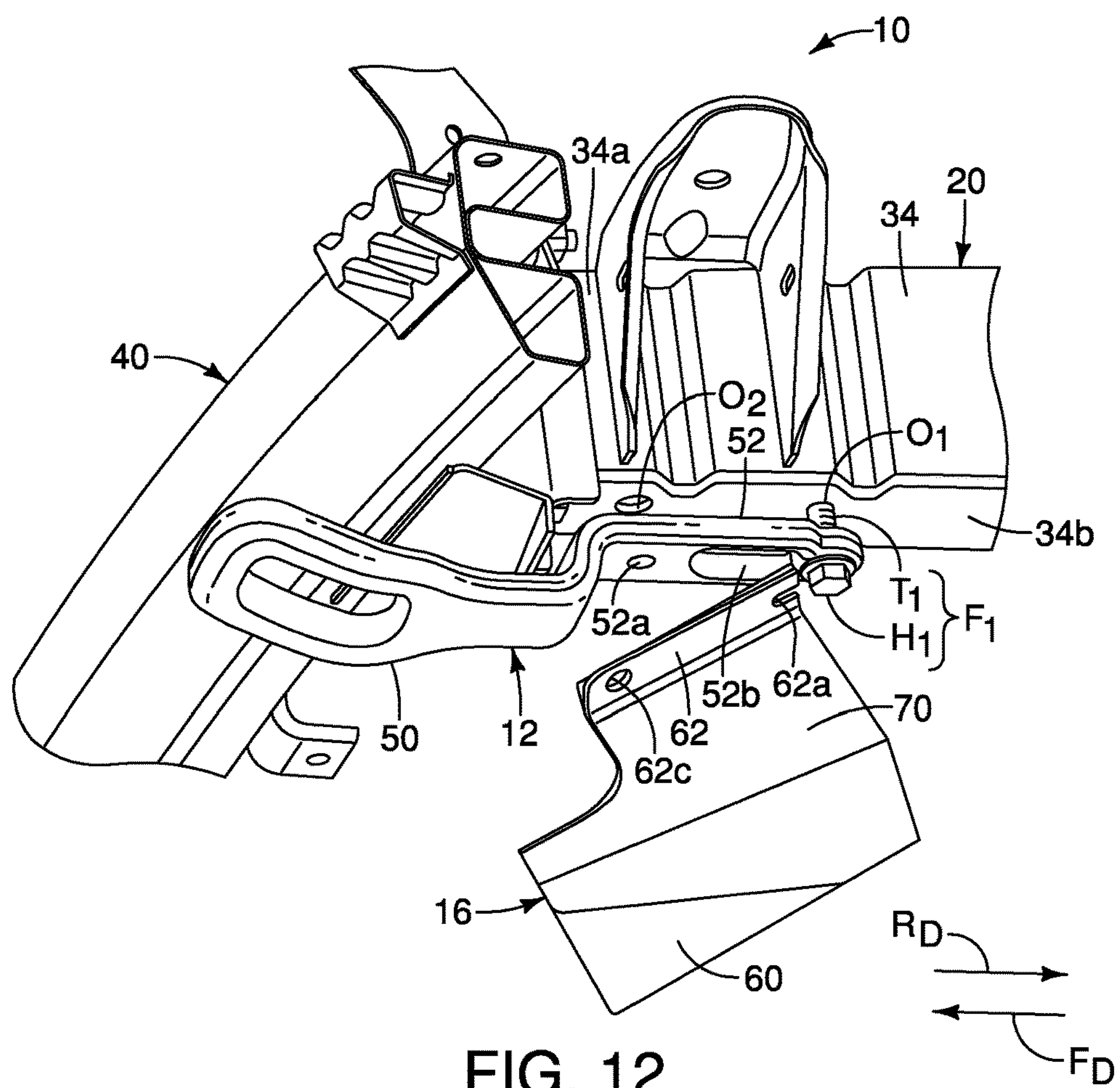


FIG. 12

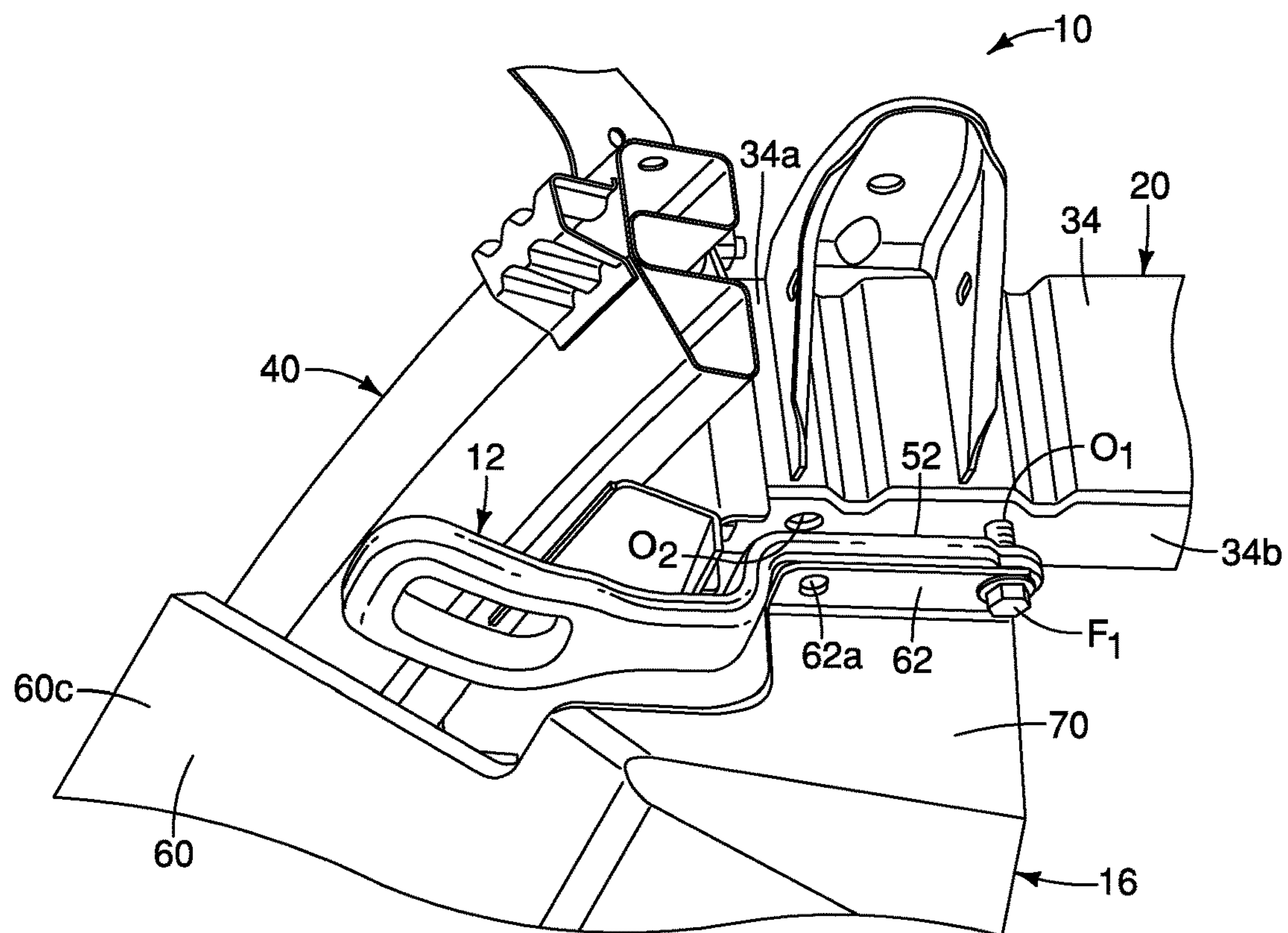


FIG. 13

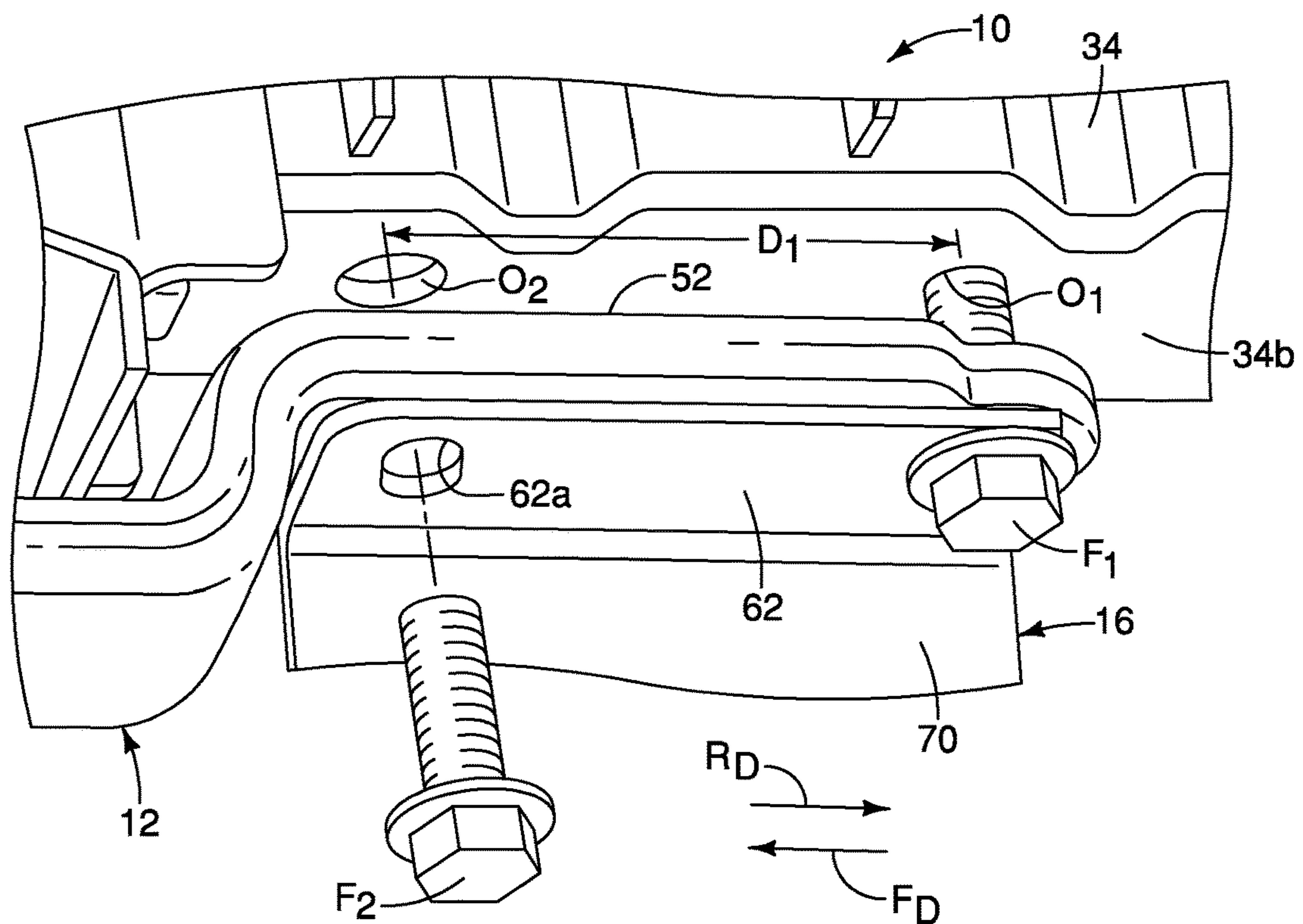


FIG. 14

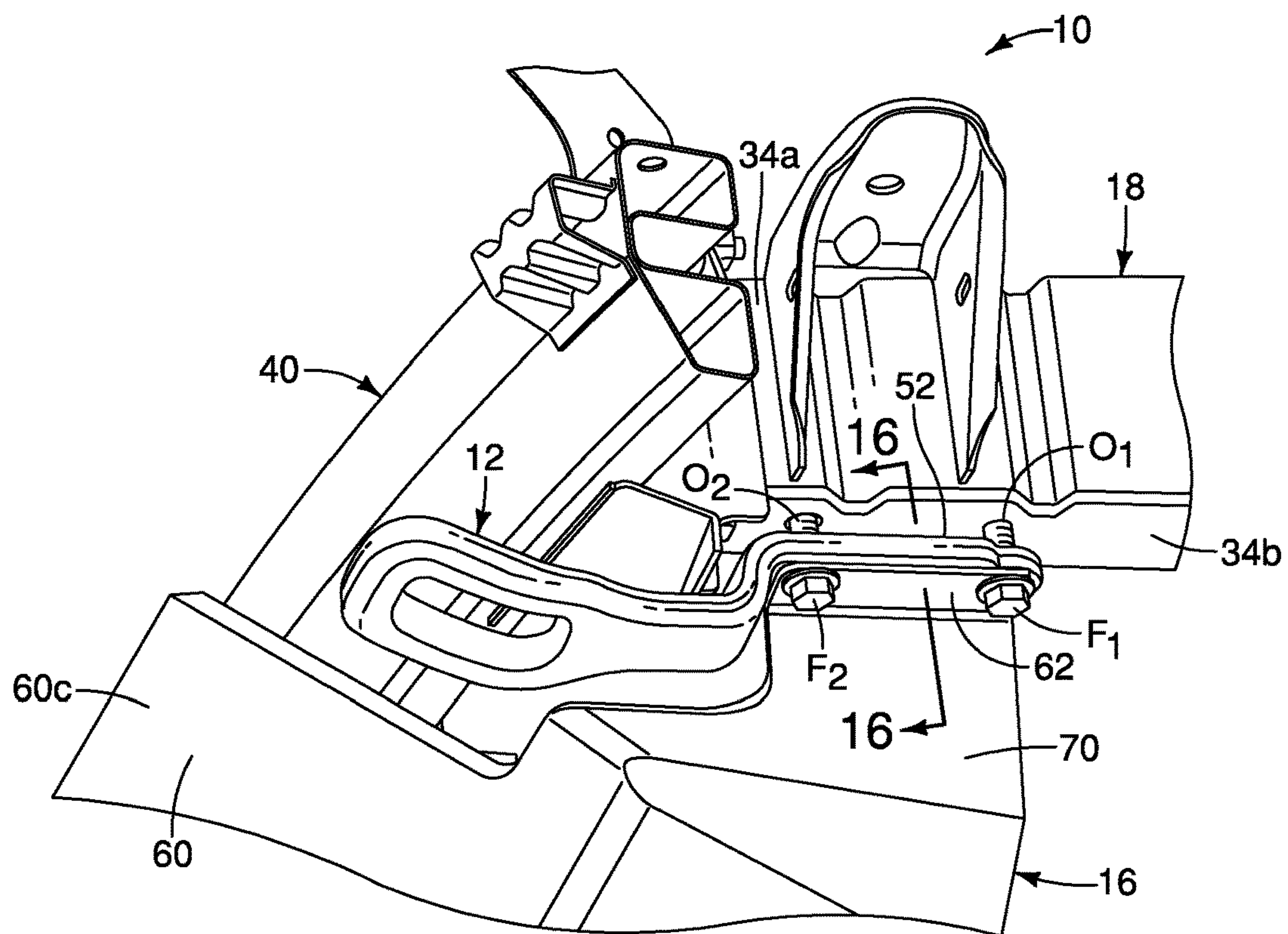


FIG. 15

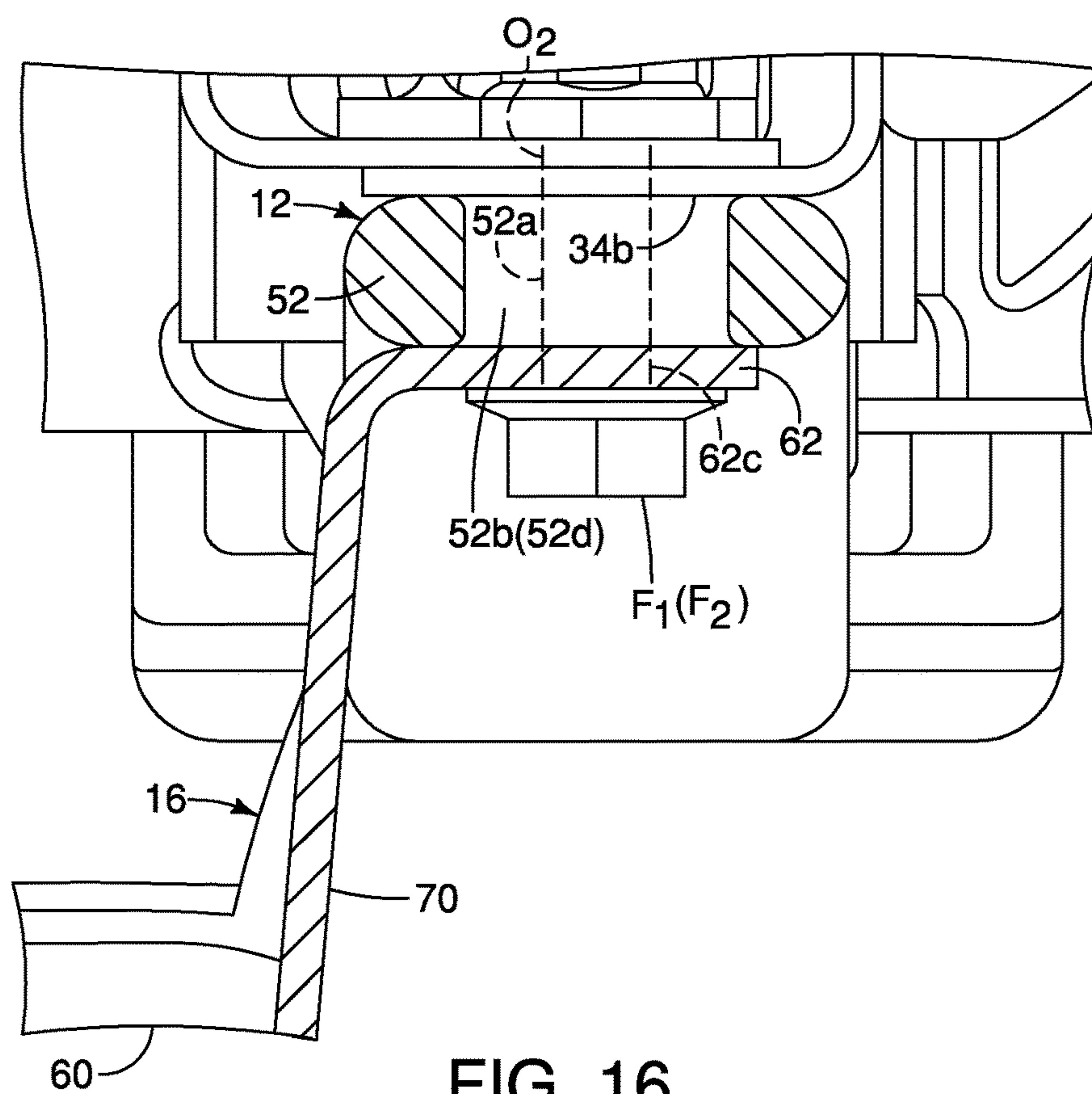


FIG. 16

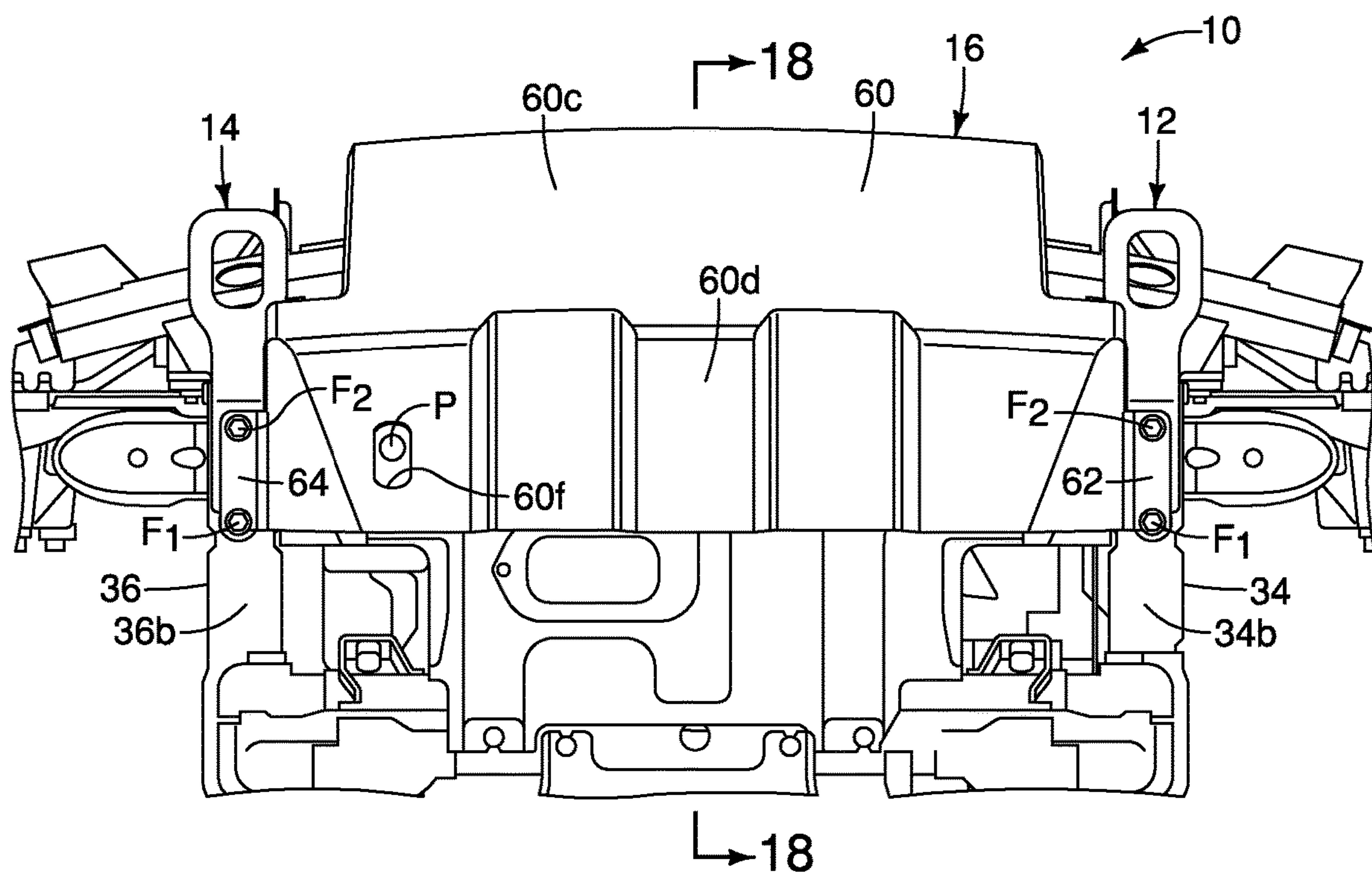


FIG. 17

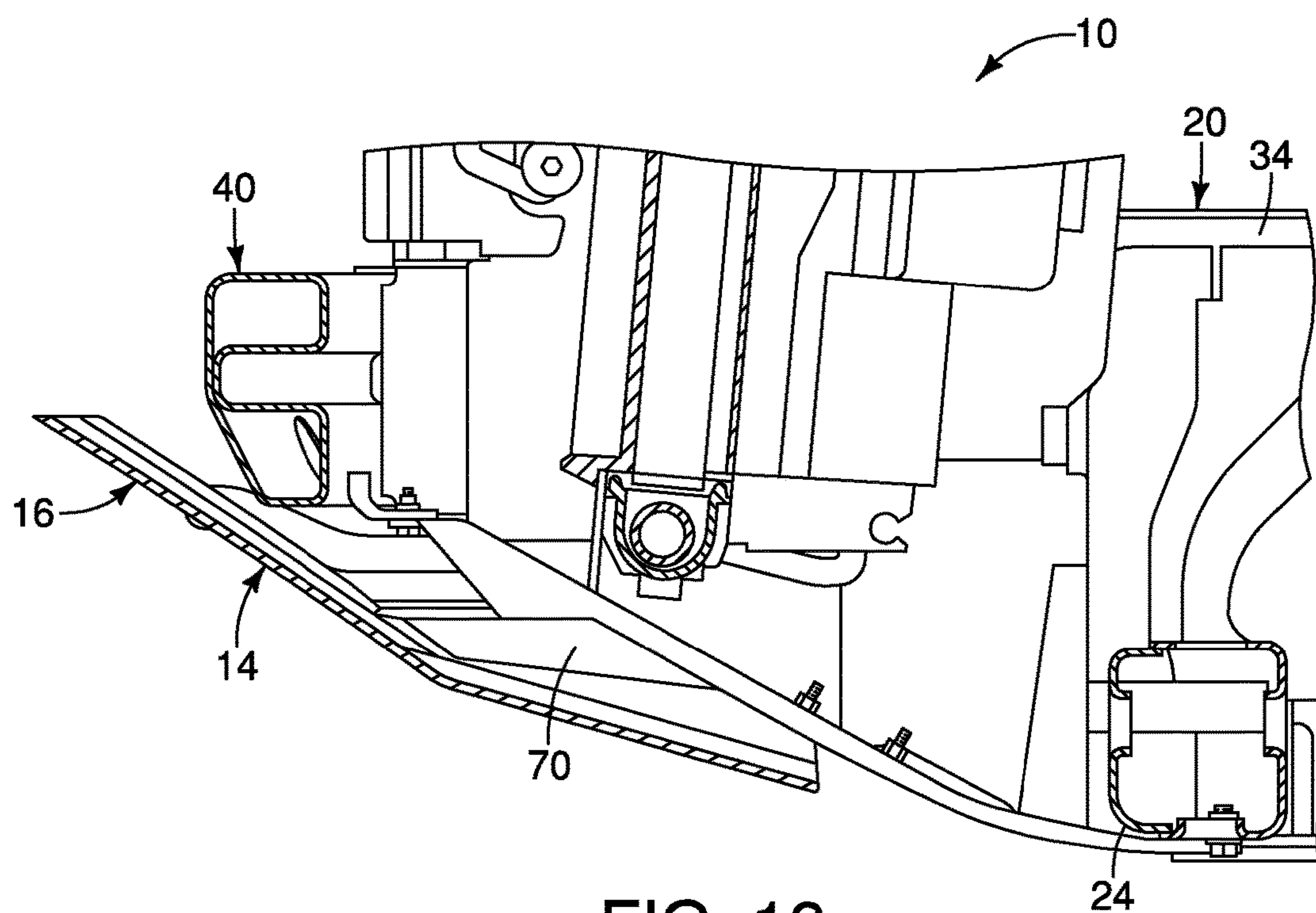


FIG. 18

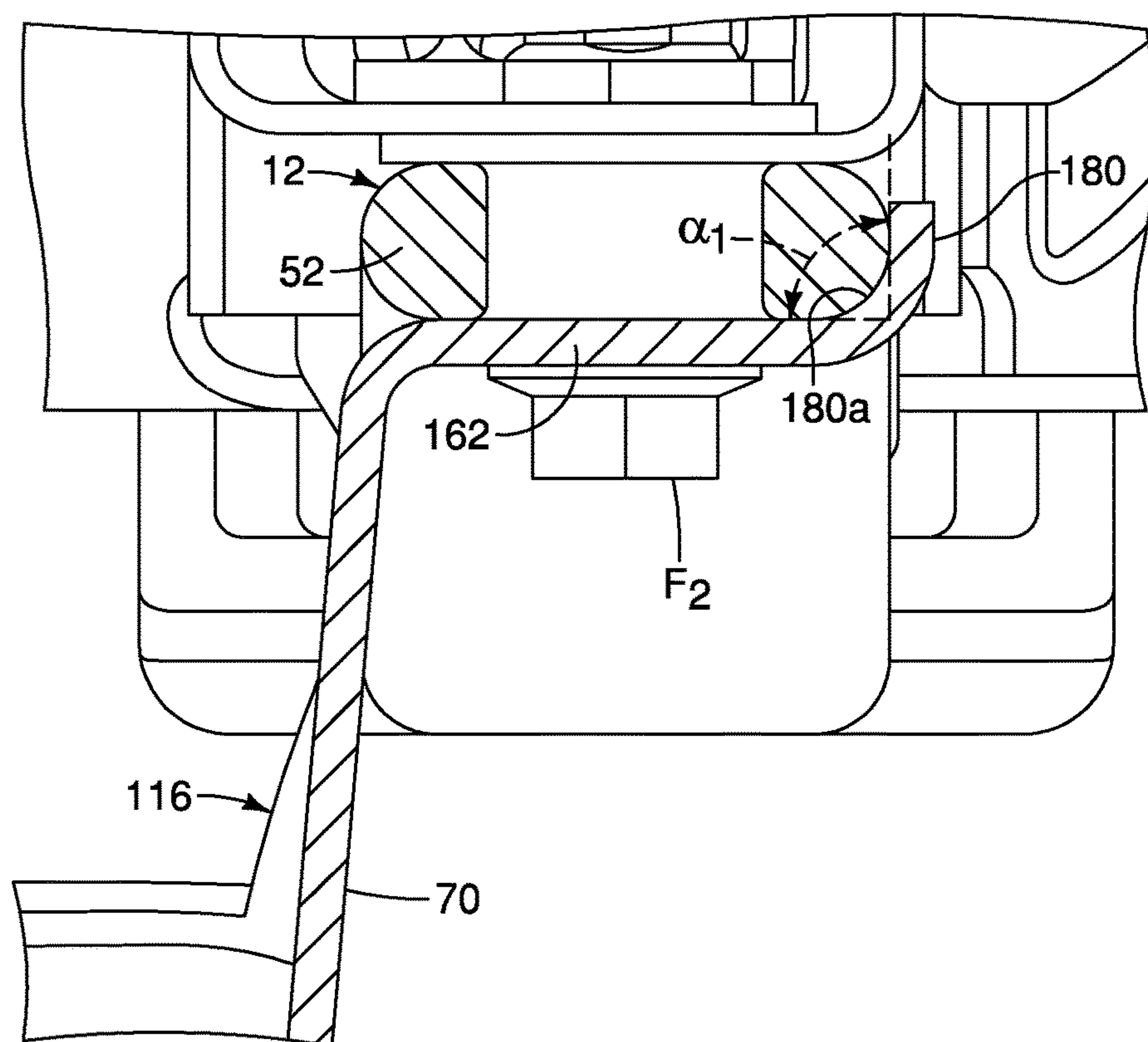
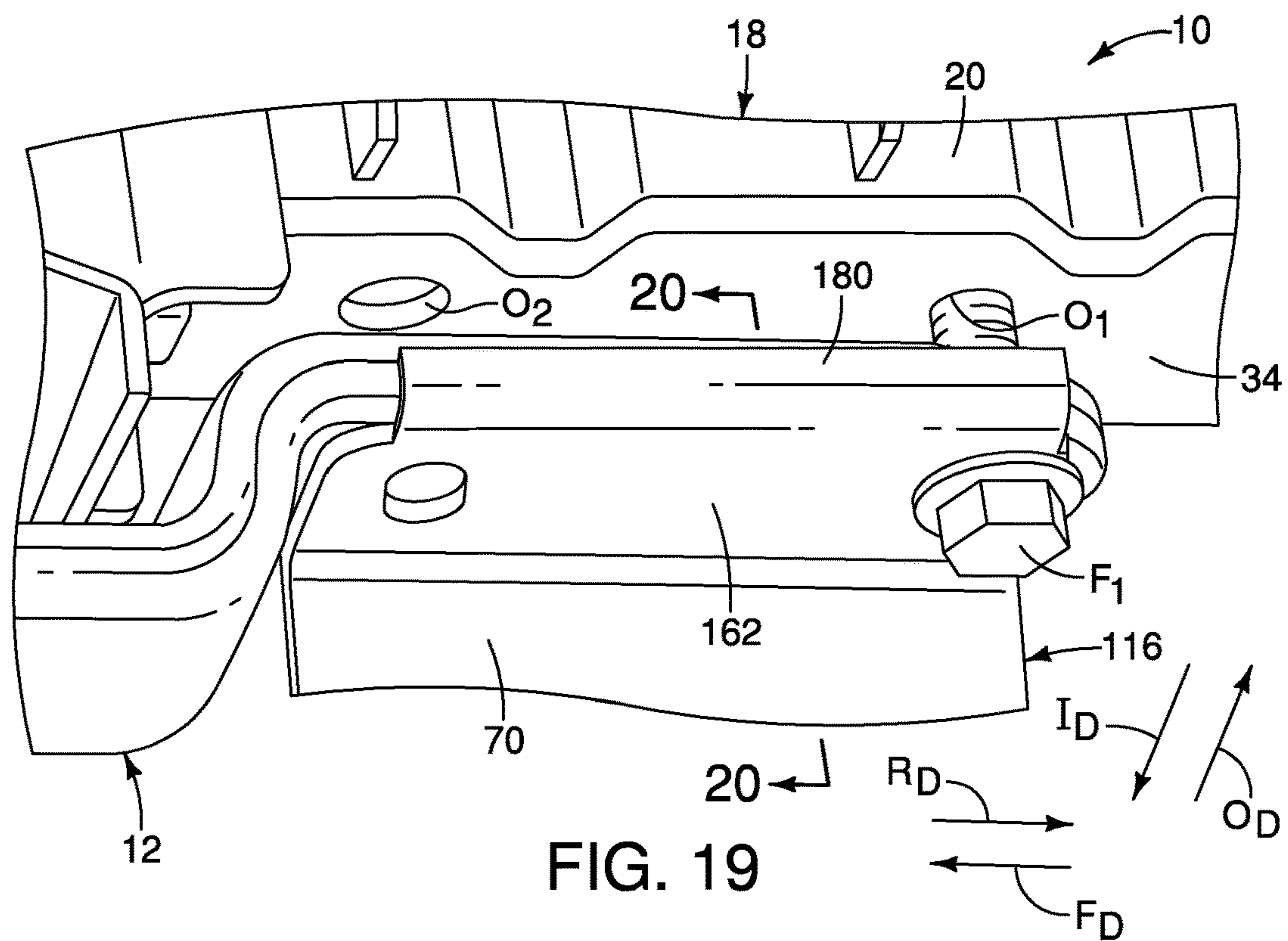


FIG. 20

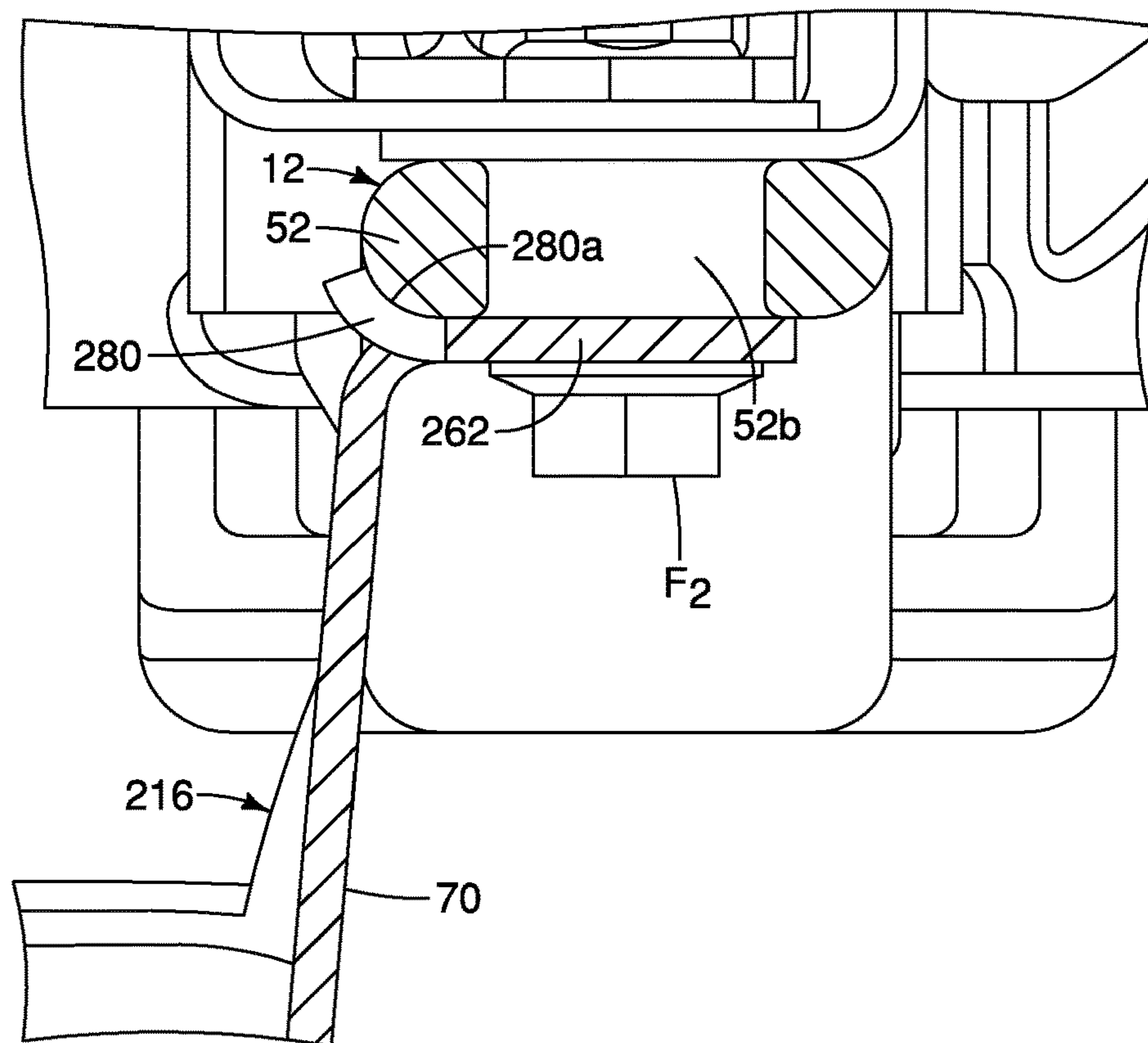


FIG. 21

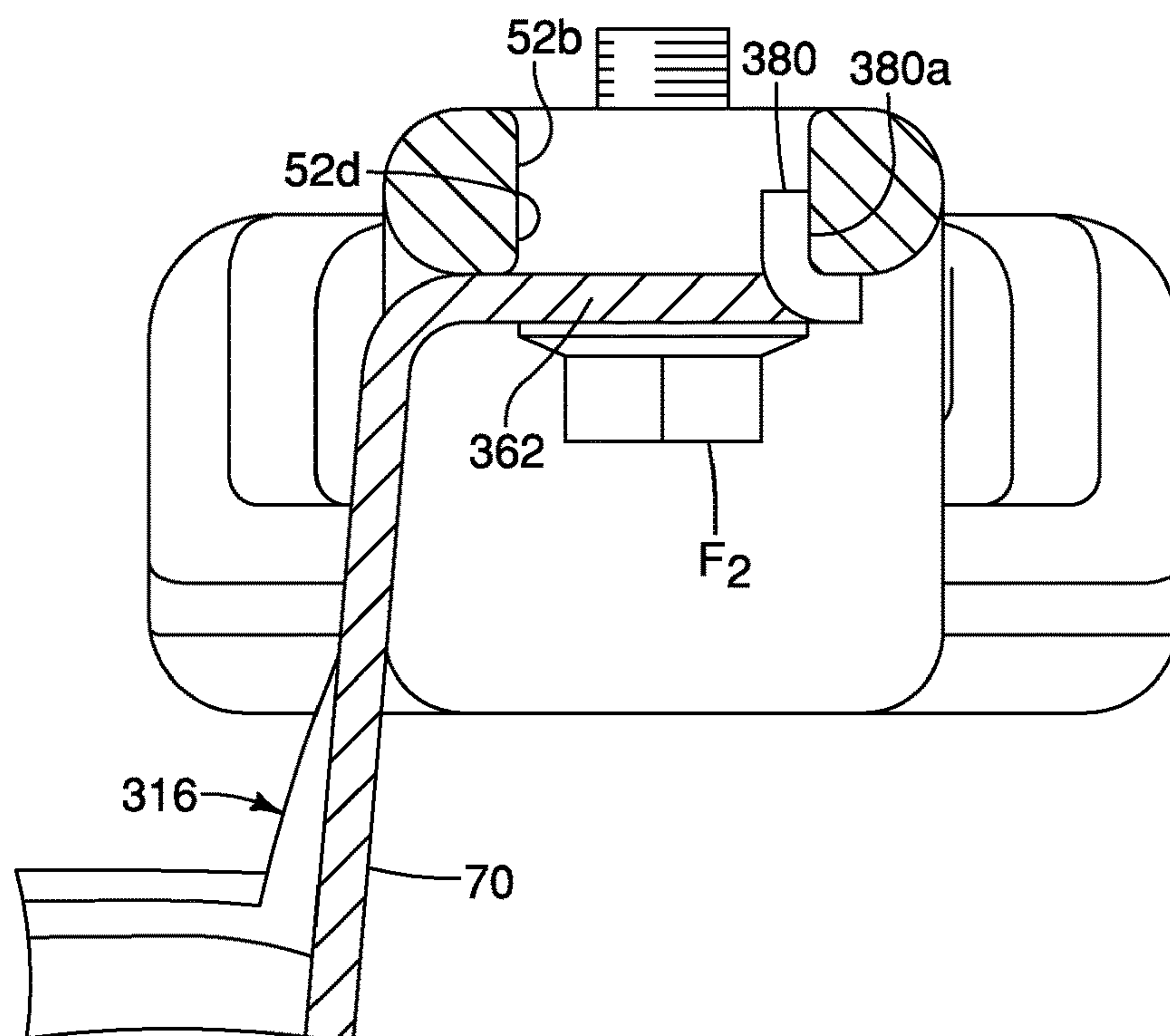


FIG. 22

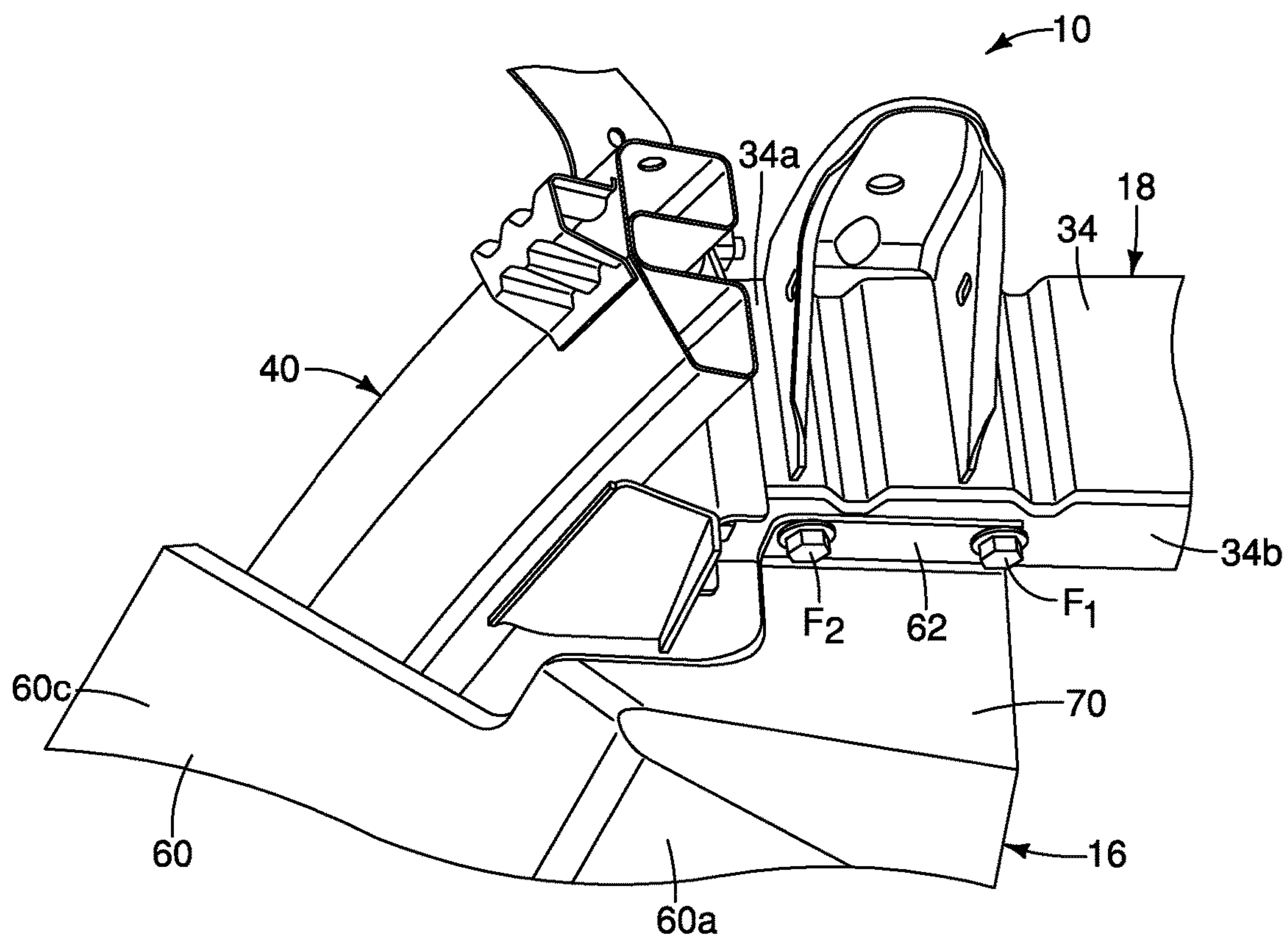


FIG. 23

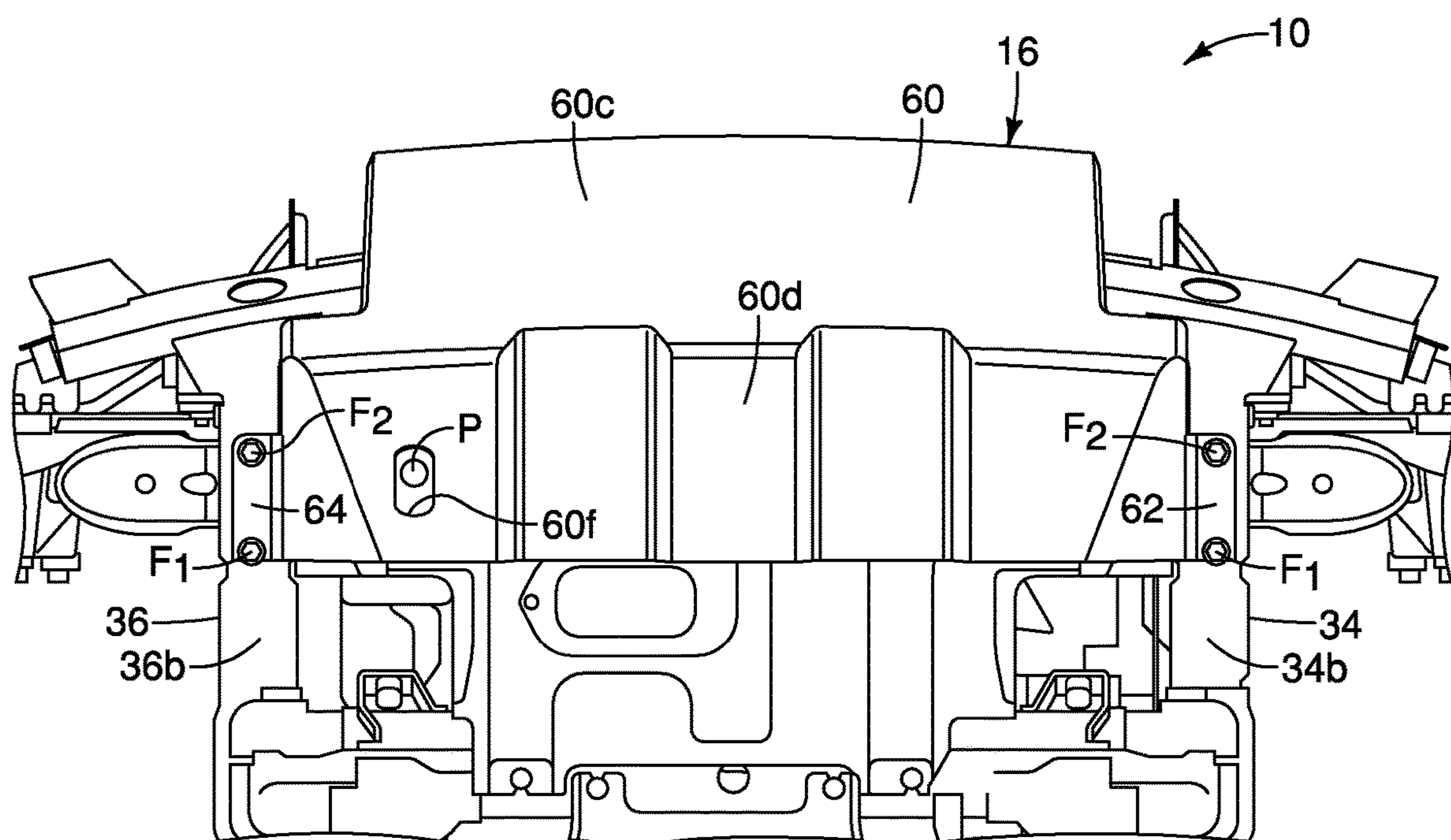


FIG. 24

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VEHICLE FRONT-END ASSEMBLY

BACKGROUND

Field of the Invention

The present invention generally relates to a vehicle front-end assembly. More specifically, the present invention relates to front-end assembly that includes a tow hook and a skid plate that attach to a downward facing surface of a front side member of a vehicle frame such that during installation, a surface of the skid plate contacts the tow hook aligning the tow hook with the skid plate and the front side member of the vehicle frame.

Background Information

Many off-road vehicles include panels that cover forward underside areas of the vehicle. Such covers are often referred to as skid panels or skid plates. The purpose of a skid plate is to protect and shield engine components and vehicle elements located with a low area of the front-end of the vehicle from flying debris during an off-road excursion. Such skid plates are not structural elements and are typically attached to bumper and/or fender elements of the vehicle.

SUMMARY

One object of the present disclosure is to provide a vehicle with a skid plate that attaches to forward areas of the vehicle frame via mechanical fasteners with tow hooks to the vehicle frame such that an alignment surface of the skid plate aligns the tow hook with the vehicle frame and the skid plate.

In view of the state of the known technology, one aspect of the present disclosure is to provide a vehicle front-end assembly with a vehicle frame, a first tow hook and a skid plate. The vehicle frame has a first front side member with a front-end portion. The first tow hook has a forward portion and a rearward portion. The rearward portion of the first tow hook is attached the front-end portion of the first front side member by at least one first mechanical fastener. The skid plate has a main section, a first attachment flange extending from a first lateral side of the main section. The first attachment flange is also attached to the front-end portion of the first front side member by the at least one first mechanical fastener. The first attachment flange has a first alignment projecting surface configured such that during installation of the skid plate to the first front side member, the first alignment projection contacts a surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Referring now to the attached drawings which form a part of this original disclosure:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a front-end assembly of a vehicle that includes a first tow hook, a second tow hook and a skid plate in accordance with a first embodiment;

FIG. 2 is a bottom view of a vehicle frame removed from the vehicle depicted in FIG. 1, showing the first tow hook, the second tow hook and the skid plate attached to a first front side member and a second front side member in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 3 is a perspective view of a portion of the front-end assembly fully assembled showing the first front side mem-

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ber, the first tow hook and a first attachment flange of the skid plate fixed together by a first mechanical fastener and a second mechanical fastener in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view taken along the line 4-4 in FIG. 1, showing the skid plate and a bumper assembly attached to the vehicle frame in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 5 is a side view of one of the first tow hook and/or the second tow hook shown removed from the vehicle in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 6 is a top view of the one of the first tow hook and/or the second tow hook depicted in FIG. 5 in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of the skid removed from the vehicle, showing details of a main section of the skid plate and the first attachment flange in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 8 is a bottom view of the skid plate showing the first attachment flange, the main section and the second attachment flange in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 9 is a front view of the skid plate showing the first attachment flange, the main section and the second attachment flange in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 10 is a side view of the skid plate showing the first attachment flange and the main section in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 11 is another perspective view of the portion of the front-end assembly depicted in FIG. 3 showing the first mechanical fastener partially installed to a downward facing surface of the first front side member with the first tow hook hanging from the first mechanical fastener in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 12 is another perspective view of the portion of the front-end assembly depicted in FIGS. 3 and 11 showing the first attachment flange of the skid plate brought into position adjacent to the first mechanical fastener and brought into contacting the first tow hook in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 13 is another perspective view of the portion of the front-end assembly depicted in FIGS. 3, 11 and 12 showing the first attachment flange of the skid plate moved such that the first mechanical fastener is positioned within a slot defined at a rearward edge of the skid plate and moved into alignment with the first front side member and the first tow hook in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 14 is another perspective view of the portion of the front-end assembly showing the second mechanical fastener aligned with openings in the first attachment flange of the skid plate and an opening in the first tow hook during assembly thereof in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 15 is still another perspective view of the portion of the front-end assembly showing the second mechanical fastener installed but not yet tightened holding the first attachment flange of the skid plate and the first tow hook in alignment with one another during assembly thereof in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 16 is a cross-sectional view of the front-end assembly taken along the line 16-16 in FIG. 15 showing the first and second mechanical fasteners tightened, clamping and sandwiching the first tow hook between the first front side member and the first attachment flange of the skid plate in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 17 is a bottom view of the vehicle and the front-end assembly showing a first pair of the first and second mechanical fasteners attaching the first tow hook and the first attachment flange of the skid plate to the first front side

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member, and showing a second pair of the first and second mechanical fasteners attaching the second tow hook and the second attachment flange of the skid plate to the second front side member in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 18 is a cross-sectional view of the front-end assembly taken along the line 18-18 in FIG. 17, showing the skid plate covering a lower portion of the front end of the vehicle in accordance with the first embodiment;

FIG. 19 is a perspective view of a front-end assembly showing a first attachment flange with an upwardly extending alignment projection in accordance with a second embodiment;

FIG. 20 is a cross-sectional view of the front-end assembly similar to FIG. 16, showing the upwardly extending alignment projection of the first attachment flange with an alignment surface contacting an outboard portion of the first tow hook aligning the first tow hook with the first attachment flange and the first front side member in accordance with the second embodiment;

FIG. 21 is another cross-sectional view of a front-end assembly similar to FIG. 20, showing an upwardly extending alignment projection of a first attachment flange with an alignment surface of the alignment projection contacting an inboard portion of the first tow hook aligning the first tow hook with the first attachment flange and the first front side member in accordance with a third embodiment;

FIG. 22 is a cross-sectional view of a front-end assembly similar to FIG. 21, showing an upwardly extending alignment projection of a first attachment flange with an alignment surface of the alignment projection contacting a surface of an attachment opening defined within a first tow hook aligning the first tow hook with the first attachment flange and the first front side member in accordance with a fourth embodiment;

FIG. 23 is a perspective view of a portion of the front-end assembly fully assembled showing the first front side member and the first attachment flange of the skid plate fixed together by the first mechanical fastener and the second mechanical fastener in the absence of a first tow hook and a second tow hook (the first and second tow hooks being omitted) in accordance with a fifth embodiment; and

FIG. 24 is a bottom view of the vehicle and the front-end assembly showing the first pair of the first and second mechanical fasteners attaching the first attachment flange of the skid plate to the first front side member (with the first tow hook omitted), and showing a second pair of the first and second mechanical fasteners attaching second attachment flange of the skid plate to the second front side member (with the second tow hook omitted) in accordance with the first embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EMBODIMENTS

Selected embodiments will now be explained with reference to the drawings. It will be apparent to those skilled in the art from this disclosure that the following descriptions of the embodiments are provided for illustration only and not for the purpose of limiting the invention as defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.

Referring initially to FIG. 1, a vehicle 10 that includes a front end assembly 11 that includes a first tow hook 12, a second tow hook 14 and a skid plate 16 is illustrated in accordance with a first embodiment.

The vehicle 10 is depicted as a pick-up truck. However, it should be understood from the drawings and the description herein below that the vehicle 10 can be any vehicle that has

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off-road drivability and/or structural design suitable for use with tow hooks, such as the first and second tow hooks 12 and 14.

The first and second tow hooks 12 and 14 are configured and designed such that a vehicle operator or passenger can connect a chain, cable or other suitable towing material to one or both of the tow hooks 12 and 14 and tow the vehicle 10 or use the vehicle 10 to tow another vehicle (not shown) out of, for example, a ditch or deep mud puddle or the like.

The front-end assembly 11 of the vehicle 10 includes a vehicle frame 18, such as that shown in FIG. 2. The vehicle frame 18 (sometimes referred to as a vehicle chassis) is a rigid structural assembly that usually receives and supports a vehicle body thereon. Since vehicle chassis and vehicle bodies are conventional automotive features, further description is omitted for the sake of brevity. The vehicle frame 18 is preferably made of heavy gauge steel or any suitable iron, aluminum material with rigidity and strength suitable for a vehicle with off-road capability.

The vehicle frame 18 in the depicted embodiment includes a first beam 20, a second beam 22, and a plurality of cross-members 24, 26 and 28 that extend between the first beam 20 and the second beam 22. The cross-members 24, 26 and 28 are welded or otherwise rigidly fixed to each of the first beam 20 and the second beam 22 creating the rigid vehicle frame 18. In FIG. 2, the vehicle body, engine and all other components have been removed from the vehicle frame 18, except the first tow hook 12, the second tow hook 14 and the skid plate 16, which are shown installed to the vehicle frame 18.

A forward portion of the first beam 20 of the vehicle frame 18 defines a first front side member 34, and a forward portion of the second beam 22 of the vehicle frame 18 defines a second front side member 36. Each of the first front side member 34 and the second front side member 36 is loosely defined as that portion of the corresponding first and second beams 20 and 22 located forward from the cross-member 26. The first front side member 34 is located adjacent to a driver's side (a first lateral side) of the vehicle 10, and, the second front side member 36 is located adjacent to a passenger's side (a second lateral side opposite the first lateral side) of the vehicle 10. The first front side member 34 has a front-end portion 34a and a downward facing surface 34b (FIGS. 2 and 3). The second front side member 36 has a front-end portion 36a and a downward facing surface 36b.

The first front side member 34 and the second front side member 36 are laterally spaced apart from one another, as are the rearward portions of the first beam 20 and the second beam 22. The first front side member 34 and the second front side member 36 are identical, except that they are mirror images of one another with symmetry relative to a longitudinal center line C_L that is defined by the vehicle 10 and the vehicle frame 18.

Several directions are defined relative to the vehicle frame 18, as shown in FIG. 2. Specifically, the longitudinal center line C_L that extends in a lengthwise direction of the vehicle 10 along a central portion of the vehicle 10. At a left-hand side of FIG. 2, a forward direction F_D is indicated by the depicted arrow, and at a right-hand side of FIG. 2 a rearward direction R_D is indicated by the depicted arrow. As well, inboard directions I_D and outboard directions O_D relative to the longitudinal center line C_L are also shown in FIG. 2.

It should be understood from the drawings and description, that the vehicle 10 can also be a vehicle with a unibody construction. A unibody vehicle is a vehicle that does not typically include a separate frame such as the frame 18. Rather, the unibody vehicle includes various structural ele-

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ments welded together. Elements of the unibody vehicle serve as frame elements functionally equivalent to the elements of the frame 18. For example, U.S. Pat. No. 8,870,267 assigned to Nissan North America, discloses a unibody vehicle body structure. The front structural support portions (30) disclosed in U.S. Pat. No. 8,870,267 also define front side members, functionally equivalent to the first and second front side member 34 and 36, as described above. The first and second tow hooks 12 and 14, as well as the skid plate 16 described herein can alternatively be installed to a vehicle with a unibody construction.

As shown in FIGS. 2-4, a bumper assembly 40 has a first end that is attached to a forward-facing surface 34c of the front-end portion 34a of the first front side member 34. Similarly, the bumper assembly 40 has a second end that is attached to a forward-facing surface 36c (FIG. 2) of the front-end portion 36a of the second front side member 36. Further, the bumper assembly 40 extends between the forward-facing surfaces 34c and 36c of the front-end portions 34a and 36a of the first and second front side members 34 and 46.

As shown in FIG. 4, the bumper assembly 40 includes attachment brackets 42, a support bracket 44, an impact absorbing member 46 and a bumper fascia 48. Since bumper assemblies 40 are conventional vehicle structures, further description is omitted for the sake of brevity.

The first tow hook 12 and the second tow hook 14 are basically identical. Their only difference is that they are attached to different portions of the vehicle frame 18. Specifically, the first tow hook 12 is installed to the downwardly facing surface 34b of the first front side member 34, and the second tow hook 14 is installed to the downwardly facing surface 36b of the second front side member 36, as described in greater detail below. Since the first tow hook 12 and the second tow hook 14 are basically the same, description of only one is provided below for the sake of brevity. However, it should be understood from the drawings and the description herein, that description of the first tow hook 12 applies equally to the second tow hook 14.

The first tow hook 12 (and the second tow hook 14) has a forward portion 50 and a rearward portion 52. The forward portion 50 has a tow hook receiving opening 50a defined therein. The rearward portion 52 has a forward opening 52a and a rearward opening 52b. The rearward opening 52b of the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12 includes a narrow portion 52c and a wide portion 52d. The forward opening 52a and the rearward opening 52b are spaced apart from one another by a first distance D_1 , as shown in FIGS. 5 and 6.

As is described further below and shown in FIGS. 5 and 6, a first mechanical fastener F_1 (also referred to as the first fastener F_1) is used to attach the first tow hook 12 to the first front side member 34. The first mechanical fastener F_1 has a head portion H_1 and a threaded portion T_1 , as shown in FIGS. 11 and 12. The head portion H_1 has an overall diameter D_2 that is larger than an outer diameter D_3 of the threaded portion T_1 .

Also shown in FIGS. 5 and 6, the wide portion 52d of the rearward opening 52b is dimensioned such that the head portion H_1 of the first mechanical fastener F_1 can pass therethrough. The narrow portion 52c is dimensioned such that the threaded portion T_1 of the first mechanical fastener F_1 can pass therethrough with the head portion H_1 is prevented from passing therethrough. More specifically, the narrow portion 52c has a width D_4 as shown in FIG. 6. The width D_4 of the narrow portion 52c is approximately equal to or slightly larger (between than 2% and 5% larger) than the

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outer diameter D_3 of the threaded portion T_1 . However, the width D_4 of the narrow portion 52c is approximately half of the overall diameter D_2 of the head portion H_1 of the first fastener F_1 .

The overall diameter D_2 of the head portion H_1 is approximately equal to or slightly larger (between than 2% and 5% larger) than an overall width D_5 of the wide portion 52d of the rearward opening 52b. Hence, the head portion H_1 can easily pass through the wide portion 52d of the rearward opening 52b.

As shown in FIG. 5, the forward portion 50 and the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12 (and the second tow hook 14) are not co-planar, but rather are offset from one another to provide space for the bumper assembly 40. However, it should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that the forward portion 50 and the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12 (and the second tow hook 14) can alternatively be co-planar.

A description of the skid plate 16 is now provided with specific reference to FIGS. 7-10. The skid plate 16 basically includes a main section 60, a first attachment flange 62 that extends from a first lateral side 60a of the main section 60, and, a second attachment flange 64 that extends from a second lateral side 60b of the main section 60. The skid plate 16 can be manufactured from a variety of materials, such as sheet metal, aluminum panel material, plastic/polymer materials or fiberglass. The skid plate 16 is not designed as a structural element of the vehicle 10, but rather as a cover that protects the underside of a forward area of the vehicle 10. The skid plate 16 is intended to protection with sufficient strength to withstand off-road usage, and have sufficient strength to withstand repeated contact with, for example, flying debris such as stones, rocks, gravel mud or any other materials encountered during off-road usage.

The first attachment flange 62 and the second attachment flange 64 are basically identical except that they are symmetrical about the longitudinal center line C_L of the vehicle 10. The second attachment flange 64 includes all the features of the first attachment flange 62. Description of the first attachment flange 62 applies equally to the second attachment flange 64. Therefore, only the first attachment flange 62 is described herein below, for the sake of brevity.

The main section 60 of the skid plate 16 extends from the first attachment flange 62 to the second attachment flange 64, as shown in FIGS. 8 and 9. The main section 60 includes a first part 60c and a second part 60d that are angularly offset from one another by an obtuse angle α , as shown in FIG. 10. Depending upon the design of the vehicle 10, the obtuse angle α can be any value between 150 degrees and 170 degrees.

The first part 60c of the main section 60 is located forward of the second part 60d with the first part 60c extending upward from the second part 60d in the vehicle forward direction F_D , as shown in FIG. 4.

The first part 60c of the main section 60 is substantially planar. The second part 60d of the main section 60 includes at least one rib 60e that extends in the vehicle longitudinal direction (that coincides with the vehicle center line C_L). In the depicted embodiment, there are two ribs 60e. The second part 60d of the main section 60 of the skid plate 16 also includes an access opening 60f aligned with an engine element P such that the engine element P is accessible via the access opening 60f. As shown in FIGS. 8, 17 and 24, the engine element P is a drain plug of an engine radiator of the vehicle 10. The main section 60 can be provided with any of a variety of dimensions. For example, the second part 60d of the main section 60 can be dimensioned to extend under only

a forward portion of the engine (not shown) or can be dimensioned to extend under the area under the entire engine and transmission.

The first attachment flange **62** (and the second attachment flange **64**) includes an upright extension **70** that locates the first attachment flange **62** at a location above the second part **60d** of the skid plate **16** with the skid plate **16** installed to the vehicle **10**. The first attachment flange **62** (and the second attachment flange **64**) are basically horizontal with the vehicle **10** on a horizontal surface. The first attachment flange **62** includes a slot **62a** defined along a rearward edge **62b** thereof and a forward opening **62c**. The slot **62a** and the forward opening **62c** are spaced apart from one another by the first distance D_1 .

As shown in FIG. **8**, as with the first attachment flange **64**, the second attachment flange **64** has a corresponding slot **64a** defined along a rearward edge **64b** thereof and a forward opening **64c**. The slot **64a** and the forward opening **64c** are spaced apart from one another by the first distance D_1 .

A description is now provided for installation of the first tow hook **12**, the second tow hook **14** and the skid plate **16** to the first front side member **34** and the second front side member **26** of the vehicle frame **18**.

As shown in FIG. **11**, the downward facing surface **34b** of the first front side member **34** includes a rearward opening O_1 and forward opening O_2 . As shown in FIG. **14**, the rearward opening O_1 and the forward opening O_2 are spaced apart from one another by the first distance D_1 .

As shown in FIG. **1**, the first fastener F_1 is partially threaded into the rearward opening O_1 . Hence, a majority of the threaded portion T_1 of the first fastener F_1 is exposed below the downward facing surface **34b**. With a large portion of the threaded portion T_1 of the first fastener F_1 exposed, the first tow hook **12** is hung from the first fastener F_1 . The first tow hook **12** can be hung loosely from the first fastener F_1 by bringing the wide portion **52d** of the first tow hook **12** up to the first fastener F_1 . The first tow hook **12** is then pushed upward such that the head portion H_1 of the first fastener F_1 passes through the wide portion **52d** of the first tow hook **12**. The first tow hook **12** is then pulled in the vehicle forward direction F_D , such that the threaded portion T_1 of the first fastener F_1 is located now in the narrow portion **52c** of the rearward opening **52b** of the first tow hook **12**. The rearward most areas of the first tow hook **12** contact the head portion H_1 of the first fastener F_1 allowing the first tow hook **12** to hang on the first fastener F_1 , as shown in FIG. **11**. It should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that although the first tow hook **12** is shown in a level orientation in FIGS. **11** and **12**. However, gravity can pull the forward portion **50** of the first tow hook **12** downward and the first tow hook **12** can remain hanging from the first fastener F_1 .

The second front side member **36**, being symmetrically identical to the first front side member **34**, is also provided with the rearward opening O_1 and the forward opening O_2 , with another one of the first fastener F_1 partially threaded in the rearward opening O_1 . The second tow hook **14** is similarly hung from the first fastener F_1 as indicated in FIG. **18**.

Next, the skid plate **16** is brought up to contact the first tow hook **12** (and the second tow hook **14**), as shown in FIG. **12**. Thereafter as shown in FIG. **13**, the skid plate **16** is pushed in the vehicle rearward direction R_D such that the slot **62a** of the first attachment flange **62** is aligned with and receives the first fastener F_1 (similarly, the slot **64a** shown in FIG. **8** is aligned with and receives the first fastener F_1 installed to the second front side member **36** as shown in

FIG. **17**). In other words, the skid plate **16** is slid into engagement with the first fasteners F_1 such that the slots **62a** and **64a** receive a corresponding portion of their respective first fasteners F_1 , with the first tow hook **12** located between the skid plate **16** and the first front side member **34** of the vehicle frame **18**, and with the second tow hook **14** located between the skid plate **16** and the second front side member **36**.

Thereafter as shown in FIGS. **14** and **15**, second mechanical fasteners F_2 (also referred to as second fasteners F_2) are attached to the vehicle frame **18** as follows. One of the second fasteners F_2 (as shown in FIGS. **14** and **15**) is inserted through the opening **62a** in the first attachment flange **62** of the skid plate **18**, through the forward opening **50** of the first tow hook **12**, and into the forward fastener opening O_2 of the first front side member **34** of the frame **18**. Similarly, the other of the second fasteners F_2 (as shown in FIG. **17**) is inserted through the opening **64a** in the second attachment flange **64** of the skid plate **18**, through the forward opening **50** of the second tow hook **14**, and into the forward fastener opening O_2 of the second front side member **36** of the frame **18**. Thereafter, the first fasteners F_1 and the second fasteners F_2 are tightened, securing the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14**, and the skid plate **16** to the vehicle frame **18**, and shown in FIG. **16**. More specifically, tightening the first fasteners F_1 and the second fasteners F_2 clamps the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14** between the vehicle frame **18** and the skid plate **16**.

As mentioned above, the openings O_1 and O_2 are spaced apart from one another by the first distance D_1 ; the forward opening **52a** and the narrow portion **52c** of the rearward opening **52b** are spaced apart from one another by the first distance D_1 ; and the slots **62a** and **64a** are spaced apart from corresponding ones of the forward openings **62c** and **64c** by the first distance D_1 . Hence, the openings O_1 , the narrow portions **52c** of the rearward openings **52b** and respective slots **62a** and **64a** align with one another once the first fasteners F_1 installed. Similarly, the openings O_2 , the forward openings **52a** and corresponding forward opening **62c** and **64c** are aligned with the first fasteners F_1 and the second fasteners F_2 installed. Hence, the insertion and tightening of the second fasteners F_2 ensures proper alignment of the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14**, and the skid plate **16** with the first and second front side members **34** and **36**.

Hence, the attachment points for the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14** are the same attachment points for the skid plate **16**, where the attachment points are defined by the respective openings O_1 and O_2 of the first and second front side members **34** and **36** (the installation locations of the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2).

FIGS. **11-16** depict attachment of the first tow hook **12** and the first attachment flange **62** of the skid plate **16** to first front side member **34** via the installation of the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2 . It should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that depiction of attachment of the second tow hook **14** and the second attachment flange **64** of the skid plate **16** to second front side member **36** with corresponding ones of the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2 is identical to the depiction in FIGS. **11-16**, except that the depictions would be mirror images of FIG. **11-16**. FIG. **17** shows the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14** and the skid plate **16** installed to the first and second front side members **34** and **36**.

As described above, the first front side member **34** and the second front side member **36** area laterally spaced apart from one another. The first attachment flange **62** and the second attachment flange **64** are spaced apart from one

another by a distance equal to the distance between the first front side member 34 and the second front side member 36.

In the first embodiment, and each of the following embodiments, the skid plate 16 is only attached to the vehicle 10 and vehicle frame 18 by the first attachment flange 62 and the second attachment flange 64. In other words, the main section 60 and the upright extensions 70 extend between the first attachment flange 62 and the second attachment flange 64 and are attached to the vehicle frame 18 only via the first attachment flange 62 and the second attachment flange 64. The main section 60 of the skid plate 16 has no attachments points of its own relative to the vehicle frame 18 and the remainder of the vehicle 10 other than attachment via the first attachment flange 62 and the second attachment flange 64.

Second Embodiment

Referring now to FIGS. 19-20, a first attachment flange 162 of a skid plate 116 in accordance with a second embodiment will now be explained. In view of the similarity between the first and second embodiments, the parts of the second embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment will be given the same reference numerals as the parts of the first embodiment. Moreover, the descriptions of the parts of the second embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment may be omitted for the sake of brevity.

The skid plate 116 is identical to the skid plate 16 of the first embodiment and includes all of the features of the skid plate 16 of the first embodiment, except that the first attachment flange 162 is modified, as compared to the first attachment flange 62 of the first embodiment. Specifically, the first attachment flange 162 has been modified to include an upwardly extending alignment projection 180. The alignment projection 180 has an arcuate shape, as shown in cross-section in FIG. 20. The alignment projection 180 extends from an outboard lateral side of the first attachment flange 162. The alignment projection 180 defines an alignment surface 180a formed thereon. The alignment surface 180a (shown in FIG. 20) is shaped to contact an outboard lateral side of the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12. The skid plate 116 attaches to the first front side member 34 via the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2 as described above with respect to the first embodiment, except that the alignment surface 180a contacts the first tow hook 12 keeping it in alignment with the first attachment flange 162 and consequently with the first front side member 34 during installation. More specifically, during installation of the skid plate 116 to the first front side member 34, the alignment projection 180 contacts the surface of the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12 moving the first tow hook 12 into alignment with the first attachment flange 162 and the first front side member 34.

As shown in FIG. 20, the first attachment flange 162 is planar and defines a first plane (dashed line in FIG. 20), and, the alignment surface 180a extends upward from the first attachment flange 162 such that an end portion of the alignment surface 180a defines a second plane (dashed line in FIG. 20), where the first plane and the second plane define an angle α_1 that is a value anywhere between 20 degrees and 90 degrees. However, in the depicted second embodiment, the angle α_1 is, for example, approximately 90 ± 5 degrees.

It should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that a second attachment flange (not shown) of the skid plate 116 can also be provided with an alignment projection identical (but a mirror image of) the

alignment projection 180 in order to align the second tow hook 14. A depiction of the second attachment flange and corresponding alignment projection would be identical to, but mirror images of the depictions in FIGS. 19 and 20.

Third Embodiment

Referring now to FIG. 21, a first attachment flange 262 of a skid plate 216 in accordance with a third embodiment will now be explained. In view of the similarity between the first and third embodiments, the parts of the third embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment will be given the same reference numerals as the parts of the first embodiment. Moreover, the descriptions of the parts of the third embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment may be omitted for the sake of brevity.

The skid plate 216 is identical to the skid plate 16 of the first embodiment and includes all of the features of the skid plate 16 of the first embodiment, except that the first attachment flange 262 is modified, as compared to the first attachment flange 62 of the first embodiment. Specifically, the first attachment flange 262 has been modified to include an upwardly extending alignment projection 280. The alignment projection 280 has an arcuate shape, as shown in cross-section in FIG. 21. The alignment projection 280 extends from an inboard lateral side of the first attachment flange 262. The alignment projection 280 defines an alignment surface 280a formed thereon. The alignment surface 280a is shaped to contact an inboard lateral side of the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12. The skid plate 216 attaches to the first front side member 34 via the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2 as described above with respect to the first embodiment, except that the alignment surface 280a contacts the first tow hook 12 keeping it in alignment with the first attachment flange 262 and consequently with the first front side member 34 during installation. More specifically, during installation of the skid plate 216 to the first front side member 34, the alignment projection 280 contacts the surface of the rearward portion 52 of the first tow hook 12 moving the first tow hook 12 into alignment with the first attachment flange 162 and the first front side member 34.

As shown in FIG. 21, the first attachment flange 262 is planar and the alignment surface 280a extends upward from the first attachment flange 262 such that an end portion of the alignment surface 280a and the first attachment flange 262 define an angle therebetween that is between 20 and 90 degrees. However, in the third embodiment the angle is, for example, approximately 45 ± 5 degrees.

It should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that a second attachment flange (not shown) of the skid plate 216 can also be provided with an alignment projection identical (but a mirror image of) the alignment projection 280 in order to align the second tow hook 14. A depiction of the second attachment flange and corresponding alignment projection would be identical to, but mirror images of the depiction in FIG. 21.

Fourth Embodiment

Referring now to FIG. 22, a first attachment flange 362 of a skid plate 316 in accordance with a fourth embodiment will now be explained. In view of the similarity between the first and fourth embodiments, the parts of the fourth embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment will be given the same reference numerals as the parts of the first embodiment. Moreover, the descriptions of the parts of

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the fourth embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment may be omitted for the sake of brevity.

The skid plate **316** is identical to the skid plate **16** of the first embodiment and includes all of the features of the skid plate **16** of the first embodiment, except that the first attachment flange **362** is modified, as compared to the first attachment flange **62** of the first embodiment. Specifically, the first attachment flange **362** has been modified to include an upwardly extending alignment projection **380**. The alignment projection **380** has an arcuate shape, as shown in cross-section in FIG. **22**. The alignment projection **380** extends from an outboard lateral side of the first attachment flange **362**, but, extends upwardly therefrom in an inboard direction. The alignment projection **380** defines an alignment surface **380a** formed thereon. The alignment surface **380a** is shaped and located to contact a surface within the rearward opening **52b** of the rearward portion **52** of the first tow hook **12**. The skid plate **316** attaches to the first front side member **34** via the first and second fasteners F_1 and F_2 as described above with respect to the first embodiment, except that the alignment surface **380a** contacts the first tow hook **12** keeping it in alignment with the first attachment flange **362** and consequently with the first front side member **34** during installation. More specifically, during installation of the skid plate **316** to the first front side member **34**, the alignment projection **380** contacts the surface within the rearward opening **52b** of the rearward portion **52** of the first tow hook **12** moving the first tow hook **12** into alignment with the first attachment flange **362** and the first front side member **34**.

As shown in FIG. **20**, the first attachment flange **362** is planar and the alignment surface **380a** extends upward from the first attachment flange **362** such that an end portion of the alignment surface **380a** and the first attachment flange **362** define angle therebetween that is between 20 and 90 degrees. However, in the fourth embodiment the angle is, for example, approximately 90 ± 5 degrees.

It should be understood from the drawings and the description herein that a second attachment flange (not shown) of the skit plate **316** can also be provided with an alignment projection identical (but a mirror image of) the alignment projection **380** in order to align the second tow hook **14**. A depiction of the second attachment flange and corresponding alignment projection would be identical to, but mirror images of the depiction in FIG. **22**.

Fifth Embodiment

Referring now to FIGS. **23** and **24**, the vehicle **10** in accordance with a fifth embodiment will now be explained. In view of the similarity between the first and fifth embodiments, the parts of the fifth embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment will be given the same reference numerals as the parts of the first embodiment. Moreover, the descriptions of the parts of the fifth embodiment that are identical to the parts of the first embodiment may be omitted for the sake of brevity.

The vehicle **10** includes the vehicle frame **18** with first and second front side members **34** and **36** and the skid plate **16**, as described above with respect to the first embodiment.

The vehicle **10** has been modified in the fifth embodiment such that the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14** are omitted. Consequently, the first attachment flange **62** and the second attachment flange **64** attach directly to corresponding ones of the downward facing surfaces **34b** and **36c** of the first and second front side members **34** and **36**. In other words, the first attachment flange **62** and the second attach-

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ment flange **64** directly contact and are fixed to corresponding ones of the downward facing surfaces **34b** and **36c** of the first and second front side members **34** and **36** via the first and second fastener F_1 and F_2 . As shown in FIG. **24**, the access opening **60f** aligns with the engine element P (a drain plug of the engine radiator of the vehicle **10**).

Otherwise, the vehicle **10** is as described above with respect to the first embodiment.

The various components and features of the vehicle **10** other than the first and second tow hooks **12** and **14**, and the skid plate **16**, are conventional components that are well known in the art. Since these other components and features of the vehicle **10** are well known in the art, these structures will not be discussed or illustrated in detail herein. Rather, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art from this disclosure that the components can be any type of structure that can be used to carry out the present invention.

General Interpretation of Terms

In understanding the scope of the present invention, the term “comprising” and its derivatives, as used herein, are intended to be open ended terms that specify the presence of the stated features, elements, components, groups, integers, and/or steps, but do not exclude the presence of other unstated features, elements, components, groups, integers and/or steps. The foregoing also applies to words having similar meanings such as the terms, “including”, “having” and their derivatives. Also, the terms “part,” “section,” “portion,” “member” or “element” when used in the singular can have the dual meaning of a single part or a plurality of parts. Also as used herein to describe the above embodiments, the following directional terms “forward”, “rearward”, “above”, “downward”, “vertical”, “horizontal”, “below” and “transverse” as well as any other similar directional terms refer to those directions of a vehicle equipped with the front-end assembly. Accordingly, these terms, as utilized to describe the present invention should be interpreted relative to a vehicle equipped with the front-end assembly.

The term “configured” as used herein to describe a component, section or part of a device that is constructed to carry out the desired function.

The terms of degree such as “substantially”, “about” and “approximately” as used herein mean a reasonable amount of deviation of the modified term such that the end result is not significantly changed.

While only selected embodiments have been chosen to illustrate the present invention, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art from this disclosure that various changes and modifications can be made herein without departing from the scope of the invention as defined in the appended claims. For example, the size, shape, location or orientation of the various components can be changed as needed and/or desired. Components that are shown directly connected or contacting each other can have intermediate structures disposed between them. The functions of one element can be performed by two, and vice versa. The structures and functions of one embodiment can be adopted in another embodiment. It is not necessary for all advantages to be present in a particular embodiment at the same time. Every feature which is unique from the prior art, alone or in combination with other features, also should be considered a separate description of further inventions by the applicant, including the structural and/or functional concepts embodied by such features. Thus, the foregoing descriptions of the embodiments according to the present invention are pro-

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vided for illustration only, and not for the purpose of limiting the invention as defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.

What is claimed is:

1. A vehicle front-end assembly, comprising
 - a vehicle frame having a first front side member with a front-end portion;
 - a first tow hook having a forward portion and a rearward portion, the rearward portion of the first tow hook being attached the front-end portion of the first front side member by at least one first mechanical fastener; and
 - a skid plate having a main section, a first attachment flange extending from a first lateral side of the main section, the first attachment flange also being attached to the front-end portion of the first front side member by the at least one first mechanical fastener, the first attachment flange having a first alignment projecting surface configured such that during installation of the skid plate to the first front side member, the first alignment projection contacts a surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member.
2. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 1, wherein
 - the first attachment flange defines a first plane with the first alignment projection being angularly offset from the first plane.
3. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 2, wherein
 - the first plane and the first alignment projection define an angle therebetween that is between 20 degrees and 90 degrees.
4. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 3, wherein
 - the angle is one of the following: 25 ± 5 degrees; 45 ± 5 degrees; 60 ± 5 degrees; or 90 ± 5 degrees.
5. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 1, wherein
 - the surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of the first attachment flange of the skid plate is an outboard lateral surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook.
6. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 1, wherein
 - the surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of the first attachment flange of the skid plate is an inboard lateral surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook.
7. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 1, wherein
 - the at least one first mechanical fastener has a head portion and a threaded portion, the head portion having an overall diameter larger than the diameter of the threaded portion,
 - the rearward portion of the first tow hook defining a rearward opening having a narrow portion and a wide portion, the wide portion being dimensioned such that the head portion of the at least one first mechanical fastener can pass therethrough and the narrow portion being dimension such that the threaded portion of the at least one first mechanical fastener can pass there-through with the head portion being prevented from passing therethrough, and
 - the surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of

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the first attachment flange of the skid plate is defined within the narrow portion of the rearward opening of the rearward portion of the first tow hook.

8. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 1, wherein
 - the front-end portion of the first front side member of the vehicle frame having a rearward fastener receiving opening and a forward fastener receiving opening spaced apart from one another, the rearward fastener receiving opening being positioned to receive the at least one first mechanical fastener, the forward fastener receiving opening being positioned to receive a second mechanical fastener,
 - the rearward portion of the first tow hook defining a forward opening and a rearward opening spaced apart from the forward opening, and
 - the first attachment flange having a rearward slot and a forward opening spaced apart from the rearward slot, with the at least one first mechanical fastener extending through the rearward slot, the rearward opening in the first tow hook and the rearward fastener receiving opening in the front side member after installation, and with the second mechanical fastener extending through the forward opening of the first attachment flange, the forward opening in the first tow hook and the forward fastener receiving opening in the front side member after installation.
9. A vehicle front-end assembly, comprising
 - a vehicle frame having a first front side member and a second front side member laterally spaced apart from one another, each of the first and second front side members having a corresponding front-end portion;
 - a first tow hook and a second tow hook, each of the first and second tow hooks having a forward portion and a rearward portion, the rearward portion of the first tow hook being attached the front-end portion of the first front side member by at least one first mechanical fastener and the rearward portion of the second tow hook being attached to the front-end portion of the second front side member by another first mechanical fastener; and
 - a skid plate having a main section, a first attachment flange extending from a first lateral side of the main section and a second attachment flange extending from a second lateral side of the main section, the first attachment flange having a first alignment projection configured such that during installation of the skid plate to the first front side member, the first alignment projection contacts a surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member with the at least one first mechanical fastener attaching the first attachment flange and the first tow hook to the first front side member, the second attachment flange having a second alignment projection configured such that during installation of the skid plate to the second front side member, the second alignment projection contacts a surface of the rearward portion of the second tow hook moving the second tow hook into alignment with the second front side member with the another first mechanical fastener attaching the second attachment flange and the second tow hook to the second front side member.
10. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 9, wherein
 - the first attachment flange defines a first plane with the first alignment projection being angularly offset from

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the first plane, and the second attachment flange defines a second plane with the second alignment projection being angularly offset from the second plane.

11. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 10, wherein

the first plane and the first alignment projection define a first angle therebetween that is between 20 degrees and 90 degrees and the second plane and the second alignment projection define a second angle therebetween that is between 20 degrees and 90 degrees.

12. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 11, wherein

the first angle is one of the following: 25 ± 5 degrees; 45 ± 5 degrees; 60 ± 5 degrees or 90 ± 5 degrees, and

the second angle is one of the following: 25 ± 5 degrees; 45 ± 5 degrees; 60 ± 5 degrees or 90 ± 5 degrees.

13. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 9, wherein

the surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of the first attachment flange of the skid plate is one of: an outboard lateral surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook or an inboard lateral surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook.

14. The vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 9, wherein

the surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of the first attachment flange of the skid plate is defined within a narrow portion of a rearward opening of the rearward portion of the first tow hook, and, the surface of the rearward portion of the second tow hook contacted by the second alignment projecting surface of the second attachment flange of the skid plate is defined within a narrow portion of a rearward opening of the rearward portion of the second tow hook.

15. A method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly, comprising

providing a vehicle frame with a first front side member located adjacent to a first lateral side of a vehicle, the first front side member having a front-end portion defining a corresponding rearward fastener opening and a corresponding forward fastener opening of the vehicle frame;

partially threading a first mechanical fastener to the rearward fastener opening of the first front side member;

hanging a first tow hook from the first mechanical fastener, the first tow hook having a rearward opening that receives the first mechanical fastener and a forward opening;

providing a skid plate with a main section and a first attachment flange that extends from a first lateral side of the main section, the first attachment flange having a slot along a rearward edge thereof and an opening forward of the slot, the first attachment flange further having a first alignment projecting surface extending therefrom;

sliding the skid plate into engagement with the first mechanical fastener such that the slot receives a corresponding portion of the first mechanical fastener, with the first tow hook located between the skid plate and the vehicle frame, such that the first alignment projecting surface contacts an upwardly extending surface of the first tow hook;

inserting a second mechanical fastener through the opening in the first attachment flange of the skid plate,

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through the forward opening of the first tow hook, and into the forward fastener opening of the frame; and tightening the first mechanical fastener and the second mechanical fastener clamping the first tow hook between the vehicle frame and the skid plate with the first alignment projecting surface moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member and the first attachment flange.

16. The method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 15, wherein

the providing of the vehicle frame further includes providing the vehicle frame with a second front side member located adjacent to a second lateral side of the vehicle, the second front side member having a front-end portion defining a corresponding rearward fastener opening and a corresponding forward fastener opening; the partially threading of the first mechanical fastener includes partially threading another first mechanical fastener to the rearward fastener opening of the second front side member;

the hanging of the first tow hook includes hanging a second tow hook from the another first mechanical fastener;

the providing of the skid plate includes providing the skid plate with a second attachment flange that extends from a second lateral side of the main section, the second attachment flange having a slot along a rearward edge thereof and an opening forward of the slot, the second attachment flange further having a second alignment projecting surface extending therefrom;

the sliding of the skid plate into engagement with the first mechanical fastener includes sliding the skid plate into engagement with the another first mechanical fastener such that the slot of the second attachment flange receives a corresponding portion of the another first mechanical fastener;

inserting the second mechanical fastener through the opening in the first attachment flange of the skid plate, through the forward opening of the first tow hook, and into the forward fastener opening of the vehicle frame, further includes inserting another second mechanical fastener through the opening in the second attachment flange of the skid plate, through a forward opening of the second tow hook, and into the forward fastener opening of the second front side member; and

the tightening the first mechanical fastener and the another first mechanical fastener includes tightening the second mechanical fastener and the another second mechanical fastener clamping the first tow hook between the vehicle frame and the skid plate with the first alignment projecting surface moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member and the first attachment flange and clamping the second tow hook between the vehicle frame and the skid plate with the second alignment projecting surface moving the first tow hook into alignment with the first front side member and the first attachment flange.

17. The method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 16, wherein

the providing of the skid plate include the first attachment flange defining a first plane with the first alignment projecting surface being angularly offset from the first plane, and the second attachment flange defining a second plane with the second alignment projecting surface being angularly offset from the second plane.

18. The method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 17, wherein

the first plane and the first alignment projection projecting surface define a first angle therebetween that is between 20 degrees and 90 degrees and the second plane and the second alignment projection projecting surface define a second angle therebetween that is between 20 degrees 5 and 90 degrees.

19. The method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 18, wherein the first angle is one of the following: 25±5 degrees; 45±5 degrees; 60±5 degrees or 90±5 degrees, and 10 the second angle is one of the following: 25±5 degrees; 45±5 degrees; 60±5 degrees or 90±5 degrees.

20. The method of assembling a vehicle front-end assembly according to claim 16, wherein the upwardly extending surface of the first tow hook 15 contacted by the first alignment projecting surface of the first attachment flange of the skid plate is one of: an outboard lateral surface of a rearward portion of the first tow hook; an inboard lateral surface of the rearward portion of the first tow hook; or a narrow portion 20 of a rearward opening of the rearward portion of the first tow hook.

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